

Seidr and Gold
by Miss Mungoe

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Summary: He'd thought his last voyage would end in Odin's hall, but the Lady of F^Ãlkvangr has other plans, and Stoick's seat at the Allfather's table will have to be saved for another day. For Hiccup, family members coming back from the dead is becoming something of a habit. " post-movie, Stoick/Valka, Hiccup/Astrid.

1. The Lady of F^Ãlkvangr

AN: I wrote 'Heimr' to appease my broken heart, but it obviously wasn't enough and since this story's been itching at my mind I figured why not. Maybe someone will find some enjoyment in my shameless wish-fulfillment. Keep in mind that this is based off the films, not the books, and I'm taking some liberties with norse mythology (there are notes on norse names/people/concepts at the bottom, for clarification). Spoilers for How To Train Your Dragon 2.

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><p>part 1.

My darling dear, for you I've wept my red-gold tears

Her feet were birds in flight, and he'd recognize her step anywhere,

soft as silk though her presence wasn't one to be ignored. A Lady of many names, but it is Freyja at his door this morn, and he knew from the determined set to her shoulders that she was not there to make a social call.

"Allfather."

The curt greeting didn't surprise him, nor did the gleam in her eyes promising an age-long headache, and he wondered if Loki hadn't put her up to this, whatever it was that required an audience in his own hall.

"Valfreyja," he returned, a wary distance in his words but his curiosity was piqued, for the years have been long and dull to his old heart and against his better judgement he found he was ready to humour her, for the sake of his boredom long and slow as the predicted Fimbulwinter. "What brings you to my hall?"

She inclined her head, and bowed low at the knee, the gesture polite where her greeting had not been. When she rose she did so to her full height, and she was a lady indeed beneath his gilded ceilings, rising tall and fair amidst carven wooden pillars. And he wondered what words would find their way past the smiling curve of her full mouth next.

"I come for Stoick the Vast."

Odin leaned back in his seat at the remark, intrigued quite despite himself. An odd request to be sure, but perhaps not quite so unexpected. But he said nothing, for he had no debts to the lady of SessrÃ°mnir, and if she had her mind set on a bargain it was up to her to present her offer first.

And knowing this, she did so without undue pause. "For his release, I will give you a hundred warriors for your Einherjar. He is a valued warrior, and worth as much, I should think."

Odin raised a brow over one unseeing eye, unimpressed by the simple bid, though intrigued by her reasons for offering it. "Indeed, and such was the nature of the last deal you made me, if you remember. The chieftain Stoick the Vast, to my Valhalla, in exchange for his ensured survival at the gathering of the clan chiefs two decades past. I granted your request then, and yet you have returned, but to what end, Valfreyja of SessrÃ°mnir?"

She pursed her lips. "I remember. But there are...some things I had not predicted. Your_ lady wife _does not share her prophecies lightly, as you well know."

Odin snorted. "Do not speak to me of my wife's stubbornness." The corner of his mouth curved upwards in a cold smile. "I am more than aware."

She did not give the impression of having heard, much less made note of his thinly veiled gibe. "And what of her interests, Odin Allfather?" Her mouth curled, clever in the light of the never-ending morning of his great hall. "And as to my reasons, well, good romances are so hard to come by these days."

He pressed his fingers against his temple, an old sigh lingering at

the back of his throat. He should have known it was something of such a trivial nature. "Your investment with the lives of these humanfolk is bordering on the ridiculous." He glared. "And do not presume I am unaware of your meddling in the affairs of the Haddocks._._"

Freyja studied the carvings in the ceiling. "I confess I don't know what you mean, Allfather."

He raised a brow. "There is no cure amongst men for a barren womb, Valfreyja. That child is your doing."

At his words, her lips pressed together in a determined line. "She invoked my name in prayer for months. What would you have had me do?" She raised her chin, the soft lines of the lady of love and prosperity bleeding away to the hardened edges of the Vanr who walked the battlefields of men on bare feet to collect her due. "And the boy has grown strong â€“ a fitting warrior for your hall, now, though you were once loath to believe it."

Odin snorted. "No child born so early and so weak has ever lived to see its first winter, much less twenty. Hel would have had him that first week, had you not interfered â€“ again._._"

She raised a brow. "And look at him now, Odin Allfather. Hel does not have him, and he is a warrior in name and deed." She paused then, eyes light with her plans and her mischief. "And I'll give him to you, should he fall in battle, if you grant this request. A hundred men, and Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III when his time comes, for the life of Stoick the Vast. Do you accept?"

He watched her intently, flaxen hair spilling pale like golden light around her shoulders and her bare feet damp from the bloodied field of FÃ³lkvangr.

"And if he lives again to die a natural death?"

She smiled â€“ that cat's curling grin that promised a millennia of problems and headaches. "Then it is Hel you must barter with, not I. You will have a hundred such men in his place." The smile widened, curving sly and wily like the wyrm around Yggdrasil's roots. "Or I will take them all to my field, if you'd rather. That goes for the boy, as well. Like you said, he is of my hand, and so it is to SessrÃ¶mnir he should come."

Odin glared, but she persisted, fierce and unashamed in her affection for the humanfolk and their silly affairs. He had no patience for such things, but Valfreyja had long since laid her claim to the Haddock family and would not soon relent. He was in his right to refuse her request, but her wrath was notorious and not one he wished to invoke on a good day.

"Odin Allfather, do you accept my request?" she repeated, and he could see the victory on her face, and in eyes that had long cried tears for her own husband. It was not strange, he thought, that she'd take it upon herself to return another's.

His sigh carried the weight of the nine realms, and when he spoke his words were a hammer-on-anvil in the gilded hall. And Odin Allfather blamed her persuasion on the simple fact that boredom was a fate worse than death. That, and she'd given him a rather compelling

offer. If he had his way, he'd have them all before Ragnarök tore their worlds apart.

"I accept."

* * *

><p>To say that his first month as chief had been difficult would be something of a gross understatement, Hiccup decided.</p>

Dragging a hand through his hair, thick and sticky with forgesmoke and ash, he wondered how his old man had ever gotten any sleep. With villagers at his elbow wherever he turned and a list of requests that seemed to only get longer the more tasks he completed, he'd barely had time to take a break from his duties to use the privy, much less take a nap.

Gobber had gone to bed a good while earlier, muttering complaints about his age and the pains of phantom limbs. Grump was snoring by the firepit, and Hiccup patted his nose on his way towards the door, dragging his metal-wrought leg which felt twice as heavy in his exhaustion after running between the forge and his other duties with little to no chance at rest between. Astrid had taken Toothless for a ride earlier, but he'd been so busy dealing with the villagers he hadn't seen either of them since they'd set out.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he staggered outside, determined to reach his bed, or at the very least the hearth, before he passed out. Astrid would have his hide if she caught him sleeping in the forge again. His mother, too, would no doubt have something to say, as he'd found the women in his life were given to speaking their minds.

There was a shuffle to his right, and he halted in his tracks to find Skullcrusher awake, looking about and sniffing along the ground, oddly restless for the early hour. It wasn't time to hunt for a good few hours, yet, and the dragon was much too old to fuss like a hatchling.

Catching sight of Hiccup, the hulking drake rumbled and snorted as it trotted forward, before shoving its nose into his chest with enough force to tip him over. "Whoa, old boy, what's wrong?" Keeping his balance by grasping the dragon's horns, Hiccup frowned at the wild look in its eyes. "What's got you so riled up, huh?"

It shoved its nose against his side again, snorting frantically, and Hiccup grimaced. "Yeah, yeah, I smell, I get it â€“ what, are you trying to push me in the well or something?" He rubbed behind one of its ears. "I know you've got a keen nose, buddy, but that's just rude..." He patted the dragon's nose, and wondered if maybe he should take a dip in the well on the way back, or there'd no doubt be words in the morning about his lack of care for his own appearance and hygiene. And if he had to listen to another of Gobber's speeches of how his father had always managed to keep the village running and his beard well-groomed and braidedâ€"

"You'd have ta grow an actual beard first, son, before ya make light of the art of groomin'."

Hiccup blinked at the voice, then snorted â€“ his exhausted mind was

playing tricks on him. "Oh man, it's like I can hear him," he addressed the dragon. He cleared his throat, a familiar impression at the tip of his tongue, but it halted, kept back by the grief that still lingered. He sighed, and stroked the curved nose. The beast had calmed somewhat, but there was a strange, wild look in its eyes he couldn't decipher. He tried to offer a smile, and lowered his voice, grasping the dragon by its horns, and shoved the grief back with near physical force as he roared in his best attempt at his old man's gruff voice, "Skullcrusher ya mangy beast " you been at my grog again, eh? Freyja's flamin' tits, how many times 'av a told ya ta keep out of th' house?!"

The dragon tossed its head, snorting great puffs of warm air, and Hiccup placed both palms on its muzzle to calm it. "Hey, hey easy, old boy, what's gotten into you?" He tried meeting its gaze. "C'mon, I know it's not that good of an impression, but you don't have to react like that!"

There was a snort behind him, then, startling him out of his wits. "You be glad he ain't skewered you for that insult, boy" only viking in this village who flaps his arms like that when he talks is you."

Hiccup stilled completely at the remark, but before he'd had a chance to reel his mind back from wherever it had plunged, Skullcrusher roaredâ€"

â€"and a moment later he was on the ground as the great dragon barrelled past, his breath knocked clean from his lungs and his peg leg bent at an awkward angle as he fumbled in the dirt.

And then there was laughter â€" the belly-deep kind he'd know anywhere and that he'd never been able to get just right, and when he inclined his head to look up, he wondered a moment if he hadn't fallen asleep in the forge, after all. Because the hulking shape eagerly scratching beneath the dragon's chin couldn't be anything but a figment of his own, over-active imagination. It just couldn't be.

But the dirt beneath his back was real enough, and the smell of the sea in his nose and the cold night breeze. And the looming shape â€" the red beard still the same he remembered, catching the light of the sun peeking above the treetops in the distanceâ€"

"What's this?" The wide, familiar grin tugged at whiskered cheeks. "I'm gone a month and come back to find the new chief rolling around in th' dirt?"

Hiccup scrambled to his feet, arms and legs all a-tangled, and he nearly tripped again but caught himself in time to save himself the embarrassment of landing on his face. His exhaustion felt like it had been knocked out of his system, his tongue felt thick and awkward in his mouth, and when he finally managed to force a word past his lips it was a disbelieving rasp, barely distinguishable over Skullcrusher's rumbling purrs.

"Dad?!"

* * *

><p>AN: Freyja is a shameless shipper and would go to great lengths to see her favourite humans be happy, I will fight you on this. So, what do you think?</p>

Odin: Allfather and ruler of Asgard.

Freyja: goddess of love, fertility, gold, sexuality, war and death. She also goes by other names, like Valfreyja and Gefn. Freyja and Frigg are by many scholars considered to be the same person, hence the ambiguous nature of her and Odin's conversation.

Hel: goddess of Helheimr, who receives a portion of the dead that do not die in battle.

Vanr: singular form of Vanir, a group of gods associated with fertility, wisdom, nature, magic and the ability to see the future.

Valhalla, **FÃ³lkvangr**: afterlives, ruled by Odin and Freyja, respectively.

SessrÃ¶mnir: Freyja's hall in FÃ³lkvangr.

Einherjar: the masses gathered in Valhalla, preparing for RagnarÃ¶k.

Seidr: or seiÃ°r; old norse shamanism concerned with changing destiny by altering its course through the weaving of a web.

Yggdrasil: the tree of life, around the roots of which the wyrm NÃ—hÃ¶ggdr lies.

RagnarÃ¶k: the end of the world.

Fimbulwinter: a mighty winter, and immediate prelude to RagnarÃ¶k.

2. House and Hearthfire

AN: An enormous thank-you for the lovely feedback on the first chapter! It's really urged me into continuing, so here you have it â€“ the second part of this spawn of my strange imagination. Notes on norse terms and names are at the bottom, so have a look if you get confused.

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><p>part 2.

The greying light of early dawn crawled slowly through the shutters, but sleep would not come to Valka.

It had become something of a habit after her return to life amongst her own kind, though inexplicable in its stubborn persistence. She'd spent the last twenty years in a solitary existence with only dragons for company, sleeping on rough terrain and in the crook of Cloudjumper's wing on particularly cold nights, and she'd never wanted for sleep.

But in a warm, familiar house with her son's steady heartbeat beneath the dark curving beams of the high ceiling, safe and ensconced in the heavy furs of her marriage bed, rest seemed a concept stubbornly out of her reach.

Glancing over at the empty side of the bed, the indentation in the furs testament to a shape much heavier than she, Valka shuffled closer to the middle. The bed had never seemed so large back then, in those earliest years of their marriage, but now when she had the length and breath of it to herself, it seemed such a vast thing. And for all the furs and with no one to hog them, the warmth was slow in sinking into her bones, and the heavy weight was constricting rather than comforting after so long without it.

Closing her eyes against the sight of the empty spot, she tried to settle more comfortably, though the silence seemed loud to her ears after years with her husband's snores and twenty more with the heavy, rumbling breaths of a whole nest of dragons. Now the only thing she could hear was the distant crash of the sea against the crag of Berk, and Cloudjumper's soft, steady breaths from the floor by the foot of the bed. There'd been no sound of the front door opening, which meant Hiccup had yet to come home, and not for the first time since her return did the foreign feeling of loneliness curl its insistent grip around the roots of her weary heart. And the bed seemed even larger still, until she couldn't take it anymore.

Throwing the furs aside, Valka slid out of the bed, wrapping a heavy shawl around her shoulders to ward off the cold. Cloudjumper perked at the movement, lifting his head in silent question, but she shook her own in turn, trailing light fingers over the scaly brow as she made for the door. "I'll be a moment," she said, hand curling around the doorknob as she let herself out and into the hearth-room on silent feet.

The Night Fury curled up by the dying fire lifted its gaze at the sound of her footsteps, and Valka offered a smile as she approached. "Hello, sweet thing. Can't you sleep, either?" Stroking the underside of its chin, she watched its head loll to the side, the cat-like eyes closing in appreciation as she moved to settle down beside him before the hearth.

"He hasn't come home yet," she observed, and the dragon rumbled a wordless affirmation, throwing restless glances towards the door. She sighed. "He's been pushing himself too hard, but will he listen to his mother, hmm?" She scratched behind one ear, and Toothless made a keening noise. "Oh aye, he's a right stubborn one, that boy. He's got that from his father â€“ head as hard as an anvil, th' both of them."

The dragon snorted, and she laughed. "Aye, I s'ppose it's good theyâ€“_he's_ got us," she corrected herself, and swallowed the word that had been on its way off her tongue. "Someone's got to look out for him, hmm? Or he'll run himself ragged before year's end, mark my words. Stoick was no better," she said, though her words were fond â€“ the memories like old friends beside her by the hearth. "If I'd luck on my side, I'd manage to wrangle him from that thrice-cursed forge before the sun rose, but some nights I'd wake to find him sneaking in â€“ would you believe the nerve of the man?" she laughed, but it was a hollow sound in her own ears. Leaning against the chair

at her back, Valka watched the dying fire, the russet gold of the embers both a comfort and an old ache, like a wound behind her ribs that refused to heal properly.

The familiar tune lingered at the back of her throat, a soft hum in her breast as she watched the hearth, one hand between Toothless' ears. The words she kept to herself, her secret of secrets now, tucked away beside her heart for a day the grief didn't sit quite so heavily. In her long years spent in her sanctuary, she'd often sung it to herself — a last piece of her kinfolk and the family she'd left behind, to remind her where she'd come from. It had been a comfort then, remembering the way he'd used to hoist her up like she weighed less than a feather, to spin her around in tune with a voice too rough for the words it sang, but lovely in its own way.

Now the memory was of a different dance, in a different time. The song was the same, though they'd not been, not then, but her happiness had been young and wild in her breast and she hadn't thought, in that brief, happy moment, that she'd be going back without him. Now their song too, was different — a thing of longing, for savage seas and rings of gold she'd take in a heartbeat if it meant they were crafted from his living hand. But for all her yearning, there was no poetry or golden rings, and no hand for her to hold.

The dragon curled its tail around her side, and she ran a hand along the scales in way of thanks, closing her eyes against the glow of the firelight. Perhaps the gods would grant her rest, and allow her to steal an hour of sleep before the sun rose fully.

She'd almost drifted off when Toothless jerked at something beyond her senses, and she startled, eyes flying open at the sudden movement. She brushed her knuckles against the ridge of his spine — a calming gesture she'd adopted by way of reflex. "What's wrong, sweet one?"

The dragon made an almost strangled sort of noise, and Valka frowned, before the sound of the heavy iron doorknob on the front door being pushed down had her looking up, a smile blooming on her face along with her understanding. "Oho, looks like it's our boy come home at last." Rising to her feet, she drew the shawl closer as she made for the door, her exhaustion chased from her system by her earlier fright. "That's a mighty early hour you return, wee chieftain," she greeted. "Did you fall asleep in the fo—"

But her words died on her tongue as the door opened fully, to reveal a shape towering much taller and wider than her son's ever would.

A shape she'd last seen drift into icy waters in a lone boat, on a warrior's final voyage to Odin's hall, enveloped in tongues of fire and smoke.

She couldn't breathe, struck dumb by the vision that had to be a trick of her own mind, weary from want of sleep — she'd seen his image before on similar nights, at the corner of her inner eye like a draugr looming at her back, a carrion bird at her grief and sorrow.

But unlike her phantom companions, he didn't vanish before her eyes, and surely a draugr had never looked so hale.—

"My Val," he said then, such a simple thing, but her world unravelled at the words, coming apart at the seams like a piece of leather poorly stitched. And though it was his voice and his smile as sure as she drew breath, she could only stare as he took a tentative step inside. Or, as tentative as a man of her husband's size and temper ever could, but there was a caution there, as though he were approaching a frightened animal. Not unlike their meeting in her cave, where he'd looked as though seeing a spectre, and though he was the spectre now, Valka was the one still rooted to the spot.

"_How_â€" "

Her words failed her, weak things lost before she could speak them, and she couldn't move an inch as he took another step towards her, until he was close enough to touch if she but lifted her hand. And before her he loomed large like he always had, sturdy and vast, and next she knew she'd stepped closer, the stray, desperate thought at the tip of her tongue that he looked too real â€" too hale, too lifelike â€" to fade at her touch. "How are you here?" she managed at last, reaching one trembling hand to a whiskered cheek, like he'd done that day in the cave when he'd looked afraid she'd break at his touch, or simply slip through it.

He grinned â€" the boyish sort he'd never really lost, though the years had sharpened his softness to harder edges. "By Odin's blessing, if you'd but believe it," he laughed, and she felt faint at the sound, and could only press her fingers more firmly against the warmth of his skin.

"I've not fallen asleep," she murmured, "Or is this a trick of Loki Silvertongue, to wreak havoc on my tired mind?"

His look softened, and then there was a hand covering hers, pulling her shaking fingers to cradle them between both of his â€" gentle, like he was holding a bird in the cage of his palms. "No trick," he said, and Odin's name was reverent on her tongue, but would not leave it to form words.

For Valka thought then back to cold nights spent in prayer to the Lady of SessrÃ°mnir, and her pleas for a child that would take to her womb, and she knew it was not the Allfather who'd granted her this gift. And like the morning she'd first pressed her shaking hands against the gentle curve of a belly she'd given up hope would ever swell with life, Valka offered her silent gratitude to the patron lady of their family, the words the gold and silver of her heart.

To Stoick she said, "I can scarce believe it," before a sob tore from her throat, the outburst like a weight lifting, and when she curled in on herself there were arms there to cradle her shoulders, hands warm even through her shawl, and there was her proof of life though her eyes could still not comprehend. "I must be dreaming, still."

A shriek from behind her, and her gaze was drawn to the nose pressing into the space between them, and she glanced up to find evidence of her own sanity in the wild look in the Night Fury's eyes. But what shook her thoroughly from her stupor was the sudden burst of laughter, before the man who was no draugr but her husband â€" living, breathing, heart beating strong and sure like a drum â€"

delivered a fond clap on the dragon's head.

"I was wonderin' where you'd gone off to, wee drake," he declared.
"You been watching over my family while I've been gone?"

The dragon's ears flattened against its skull, and it lowered its head with a keening sound. Stoick snorted, and tugged at one ear â€“ an affectionate gesture she'd seen Hiccup do on occasion, meant to be teasing. "Yer not still feelin' guilty fer the incident with that lunatic Bludvist?"

The ears flattened even further in response, and the dragon ducked its head lower still, a gurgling rumble rolling up from deep within its belly â€“ a sure sign of regret, or whatever name dragons assigned the feeling. But then, quite without a word of warning, Stoick reached out to flick its nose sharply, and Toothless drew back with an indignant shriek. "Aye, that's more like it!" he scoffed. "It's bad enough ta find the lad sulking, but you've no excuse â€“ yer s'posed to be the sensible one."

Toothless grumbled a response, to which Stoick only snorted, and Valka watched with near detached fascination the exchange unfolding before her â€“ this man who'd once swung his axe with such surety, unmindful of those he cut down, stubborn mind set in stone on the subject of dragons. But there was a fondness there she'd not had the chance to witness, though Hiccup had been eager to relay the story of his father's change of heart.

Kneeling down before the beast, Stoick reached up to scratch behind one ear. "How 'bout we leave that where it is in the past, aye?"

The Night Fury issued a low, keening rumble, and Stoick grinned. "Good. Now," he said, as he rose from his crouch. "I've a certain boy chief t' have a word with, but he's run off at the sight of me, though I can't say I blame 'im." He patted the dragon's head. "Wouldn't mind fetchin' him home for me?"

The ears perked up, and the dragon looked towards the front door, before it shuffled forward gingerly with its signature loping gait. The door stood ajar, and with a last look back and a strange noise like a gurgle, Toothless disappeared into the dawn-light, the mismatched red-and-black of his swinging tail vanishing around the edge of the door before Stoick pushed it closed.

Valka was still staring when he turned around to face her, and it must have been a strange look on her face indeed for the way he ducked his head, and she started at the sudden memory of the awkward brute of a man who'd once asked for her hand in song.

"You're good with him," she said then, the words the only ones that came to mind, and she winced at the naked surprise in her voice.

His smile was a rueful thing as he stepped closer. "Aye, but I've come a long way." He grinned, fingers curling around one of her hands, dwarfing it. "Ought t' have listened to you years ago, Val."

She laughed â€“ the sound a wild burst from her heart, and she felt a sudden rush of fondness. "Oh, I don't know about that â€“ it would've taken nothing short of a hammer to yer right anvil of a

head," she said, turning her hand to wind their fingers together tightly, as though to confirm him still tangible before her.

He squeezed hers back. "It took your boy," he said then. "You'd 'ave been proud to see 'im, Val."

"Our boy," she corrected. "He's got his stubborn streak from you. I should've known it would take nothing less." And this time, her smile did not tremble. "And I should've known you'd be too stubborn for death to keep you long."

He chuckled. "Shame you had to mourn," he said then, voice softer than she'd ever heard it. "I'd 'ave spared you this month, but Odin knows I've no right to complain."

Her look softened. "I mourned you twenty winters," she murmured. "The turn of a moon's no matter." His brows pulling close said enough about how much he believed her, but he didn't push, and Valka was glad of his understanding, silent as it was in the space between their palms.

She'd still not wrapped her mind around the reality of his presence, and the gods themselves only knew the reason behind it. She'd no clue what she'd ever done to earn such a boon, but she dared not risk incurring the Allfather's wrath with questions — the old gods were volatile creatures with quick tempers and little mercy for humanfolk, and she'd count her blessings where she found them, inexplicable though they might be.

Like her husband thought lost but now warm and living at her fingertips.

"My Val," he said again, and now it was she who laughed, her delight loud and true and raw in her breast, and this time her lips were first to spill the words, her voice hoarse with the joy pressing against her throat, the familiar melody an unsteady rhythm,

"My dearest one, my darling dear"" —but she couldn't finish for her own laughter, trembling with tears and thick with her happiness fierce as a forge-fire, rising high in her throat as he lifted her up, to spin her 'round until the glow of the embers and the dark of the hearth-room bled into nothing, and all she knew were the hands large and warm at her waist and the rough voice picking up her words where she'd dropped them, their only music the tramp of his feet and the peal of her laughter. And with the slow rise of the sun above the rooftops of Berk, there was song and dance again within the walls of a home that had long since seen either, and their rejoicing was such that it drew the sleeping from the warmth of their beds though the frost of early morning still clung to the rafters and the window panes.

And as the news of Odin Allfather's return of Stoick the Vast spread to every nook and corner of Berk, no eye was present to witness as a phantom ship slipped quietly from the empty village docks, to vanish in the morning mist.

* * *

><p>"You needn't look quite so smug, VanadÃ-s."<p>

The words were delivered with a hidden mirth that betrayed his attempted severity, but smug she looked, and smug she would be for some time yet — a century or two, perhaps, or however long it suited her fancy. "Your hand might have brought him back, but 'tis my name on her tongue, Odin Allfather," Freyja responded cheekily, cutting a sharp glance towards him, eyes alight with the soft golden glow of his hall.

After a patient sigh borne of eons of dispute and unease, the great Æs offered a wry smile. "And so it is."

Her eyes glittered. "And what will you do now?"

He did not move from his seat, nor did he drop his gaze from hers, but there was a lightness about his being that bespoke amusement rather than irritation — an oddity for him, Freyja thought. "The web will weave itself anew," he spoke then, voice a booming thrum through the carven floors and pillars curving like golden arcs. With his lone eye he threw her a knowing look, the way only he could. "And I suppose I'll have to see for myself."

Her answering smile curved along her mouth, a naked testament to her shameless pleasure. "Yes, I suppose you will."

Closing her eyes, she recalled the weave of the web before her, the fabric agleam with the vastness of the nine realms, and the threads forever shifting with the whim of mortal folk and gods alike. There were tears to be fixed — mended and aligned with the course of destiny once again. Stoick the Vast would not change much — no more than his son had already altered the pattern — but there were paths even Frigg herself could not See, yet.

"I suppose we both will."

* * *

><p>AN: The vikings of old had different myths for what they called "the living dead", one of which were the **draugar** **(sing. form draugr)**, who were evil creatures haunting the graves of the dead (think modern day zombies), and the **Einherjar**, the warriors of Odin's Valhalla. So in a sense, Stoick didn't die so much that he merely passed from one realm to another. And if he could go one way, I see no reason he couldn't be sent back, if Odin wished it so.

Loki: called Silvertongue and Liesmith; the god of mischief.

Frigg: Odin's wife and queen of Asgard, known for her prophetic powers. (Note: There is disagreement on whether or not Frigg and Freyja are the same person, so for this story I've made it deliberately ambiguous.)

Vanadís: another of Freyja's many names.

Æs: singular form of Ætsir, the principal pantheon of norse mythology (includes Odin, Thor, Baldr etc.); the Vanir (of which Freyja is part) make up the second pantheon.

3. Stoick the Vast

AN: Your feedback continues to amaze me, and so I've been on something of a writing spree. There are a few more parts still to come, but I hope you're enjoying this so far!

* * *

><p>part 3.

"Hiccup!"

He'd made note of their approach before she'd called out, but he didn't move from where he sat as Toothless came to land beside him, and it wasn't until his rider slipped out of the saddle that he glanced up to see Astrid pull her hood away from her face.

"There you are â€“ I've been looking all over for you!" She was out of breath, cheeks flushed and with excitement brimming along her smiling eyes as she strode towards him, Toothless at her heels. On any other day her enthusiasm would have had him rising up to catch her as she got out of the saddle, but as it was he didn't feel comfortable standing up, much less offer a more enthusiastic greeting.

"Well, you've found me." He gave a flourish, grimacing at the sight of his hand still covered in soot. He still hadn't managed a bath, he'd been so distracted he'd forgotten everything he'd been heading home to do â€“ sleep, even, though he was dead on his feet.

There was a hand on his jerkin then, tugging, and Astrid's voice was a breathless ramble in his ears, the words stumbling over each other in her excitement. "Hiccup, come on, we've got to get back to Berk, there's something you've got to see â€“ you wouldn't believe me if I toldâ€" "

"Dad's alive."

Her mouth snapped shut, before her brows drew together sharply.
"Wait, whâ€" you know?"

He shrugged â€“ a non-committal gesture as he waved a hand before him, motioning at nothing. "Yeah, I...ran in to him earlier. Sort of."

Astrid said nothing to that, and when he looked up her previously eager expression had warped into stunned disbelief. "Stoick is back, Hiccup," she emphasised then, as though speaking to a child, or someone particularly slow. Then she laughed â€“ a breathless sound he'd always liked. "Your dad's back. I mean, it's amazing." They're all saying it's Odin's doing, andâ€" she stopped. "And why are you looking at me like that?" She crossed her arms over her chest. Toothless seemed to agree, and made a gurgling noise as he shoved his head into Hiccup's line of vision.

He nudged the dragon out of the way. "It's just...it's insane, Astrid. Old gods andâ€" Toothless would you sit down â€“ resurrections or whatever you want to call it, it's a little too amazing for me."

She gaped. "A littleâ€" your dad's _alive_, Hiccup â€" what other explanation is there?"

"He came back from the _dead_, Astrid," he said, wondering how she could so easily overlook that particular detail to get to the 'alive' part. "I mean, who does that?"

She didn't seem the least bit perturbed by his pointing the rather obvious, and simply raised a brow. "Uh, your family, Hiccup?"

He frowned. "What? No they don't."

She gave him a look. "You thought your mom was dead up until a month ago, didn't you?"

"Hey, _that_ was different â€" they hadn't actually buried her. They all just assumed she'd been eaten."

"But she wasn't," Astrid countered. "She lived with dragons for twenty years, and then you _found_ her. Doesn't that, I don't know, say anything to you?"

Now it was Hiccup's turn to raise a brow. "Like what?"

The blonde rolled her eyes fondly as she came to take a seat beside him, tucking her legs beneath her as she nudged his shoulder with her own. "You really are dense sometimes," she said. "Your family isn't normal, Hiccup," she declared, as though stating that the sky was blue. "Is it so strange thinking that you've got someone looking out for you?"

"Like an old god?" he deadpanned.

She tugged at one of his braids. "_Yes._ Why is that so hard for you to believe?"

"How is it _not_ hard for you?" he countered.

Astrid pursed her lips â€" the way she did that made him want to impulsively kiss her, but something in her eyes held him back this time, and his brows drew together at the serious look on her face.

"When I was younger, my mom used to tell me stories," she said then. "About your family â€" she used to say you had the gods' blessings on your house." She met his gaze, eyes seeking a permission she already had, and when he nodded for her to continue, she drew a breath.

"You were born early â€" so early no one thought your mom would survive, but she did. And _you_," she paused, seeming to choose her words carefully. "No one thought you'd make it a week, but you _did_." Then your mom is abducted by dragons and survives for twenty years, and your dad â€" well, you've heard the stories, they're pretty much all about how he's miraculously survived some event or another, escaping by the skin of his teeth..." she waved her hand, her words trailing off to nothing.

Then her fingers brushed against his metal leg, and there was a pensive look pulling at her features. "You shouldn't have survived this, either, but you did. Can you honestly chalk all that up to some

freak coincidence?"

Toothless rumbled his agreement, and Hiccup sighed, shifting his eyes to the sprawling landscape. The morning mists were withdrawing, revealing jutting tops of a sparse evergreen forest. He hadn't gone far from the village â€“ without Toothless he was limited to the places he'd used to go when he was younger, and he'd needed to get away from Berk and his father.

His father, who'd just come back from his watery grave or Odin's hall or whatever other explanation the others could seemingly accept without difficulty.

"I just figured we were lucky," he said at length.

When he glanced towards her, Astrid was smiling. "You know, some would call that the luck of the gods."

He didn't quite snort, but it was close, and she didn't push, but sat close beside him as he turned her words over in his mind. Toothless sat at his other side, tail curled around them both. If he closed his eyes, he could have drifted off, for the exhaustion of two straight nights in the forge was a weight on his eyelids and his shoulders both. But though his body longed for rest, his mind wouldn't leave him alone, his thoughts like an itch where he sat.

"What if it's only temporary?"

Astrid glanced up, and he caught the surprise flickering across her face before her expression softened. "Life is temporary, Hiccup."

He shook his head. "No â€“ not like that. I mean yeah, but...what if he has to go back? Did anyone even ask why he's here? Whyâ€“" it took effort to even speak the words, "Why they let him come back in the first place?" He wouldn't invoke the name â€“ he didn't have a god-fearing bone in his body, but something held his tongue. Habit, probably, more than anything else.

Astrid said nothing, and so he continued, the words spilling out before he could stop them. "It's just...all my life it's been just me and dad, you know? Just the two of us, but there's always been this...gap, there, where mom should have been, but I've been used to it. And then...then we found her, and..I don't know, there was this moment where I thought we'd be together, the three of us."

He looked up at the sky, and the clouds drifting overhead. It reminded him of his mother â€“ jumping along a sea of white like a wraith on a dragon's back. "You didn't see it, Astrid â€“ how happy he was to see her. And it was just so...nice," he said lamely, unable to better explain the sense of wholeness that came of two sets of arms pressing him close.

"And then...well." He waved a hand, as though grasping for the words to explain watching his father's last voyage â€“ of shooting that first arrow to set the boat aflame to light his way into the afterlife. His shoulders slumped. "Living with mom's been great, but...it's the same. I've got one parent, and the gap's still there, except now it's her missing him and I just..." he paused, and shook his head. "What if I get used to it? Having two parents...being a family...and it doesn't last?"

Astrid didn't reply immediately, but seemed to consider his words, and for a moment Hiccup felt a fool for saying them, and a fool for his fears.

Then she smiled. "So what?"

He spluttered. "_So wh_â€"what do you mean 'so what'?"

She shrugged. "So what if it's only temporary? That's the same for everyone, Hiccup. No one knows how long they're going to live, except maybe Gothi because we're pretty sure she's made some kind of deal, but the rest of us? We're all pretty mortal, and we've got to make the best of the time we've got, even if it's only a day or a week." She inclined her head to seek his gaze. "If your dad does go back...do you want to look back on the time you got and know that you spent most of it sitting out here?"

Then she rose, unwilling, it seemed, to wait for an answer. But she'd always been one for action rather than talking, and it was something he'd always admired about her. But not, he realized, something he'd ever been very good at himself.

"Come on," she said, holding out her hand, palm upraised with a silent promise. "He's in the mead-hall with the others, but I think you're the one he's waiting to see."

Hiccup hesitated, but then his fingers curled around hers, and she drew him smoothly to his feet. Before she could pull away he ducked his head to catch her lips, pressing his nose into the crook of hers, chilled from the cold. But her smile was warm against his mouth, the corners of her lips curving upwards with pleasure. When he drew away her eyes were bright beneath her fringe, and her cheeks the rosy red of the morning sky.

"Thanks, Astrid," he said, the words painfully inadequate, but his heart did that swelling thing if often did around her, and if he opened his mouth more he was afraid something else would slip out â€" something he was saving for another day, when he had less on his mind and no father just returned from the afterlife.

She grinned. "That's the thing about you Haddock men," she declared, winding her arms around his midsection. The clouds had dispersed enough to let the sun through, and it caught in her hair, golden fair and glowing with the magic of early morn. She placed one hand on his chest, pressing against his heart. "You might go far in flight, but you've always got someone to bring you back."

Hiccup raised a brow. "And if _I _go to the afterlife?"

She didn't hesitate. "Then I'll bargain with Odin himself," she said. Simple as that.

And there was such conviction in those words, for all his scepticism on the subject of gods, Hiccup didn't doubt her for a second.

* * *

><p>"What about Stoick the Undying?"

He glanced up from the flagon his wife had pushed towards him, to find Gobber rubbing his moustache. "Tho' Stoick the Deathless' got a nice ring to it, too," he added.

A small hand touched upon his arm, fingers feather-light and soft, and he was momentarily distracted from the blacksmith's rather one-sided conversation as Valka took a seat beside him at the long table. And he realized it hadn't settled, yet â€“ the reality of having her beside him, alive and well after so many years without her. It took another moment, too, for him to be reminded of the fact that she'd been the one left behind, this time. The gentle touches, too deliberate to be anything but, went to show how much she'd settled back amongst her own kin, and how comfortable she'd grown with human contact than she'd been when they'd first found her, and she'd flinched away from his touch.

But the wary crease to her brow, the kind he'd not been present to see develop the years she'd been gone, and the way her hands seemed to linger, told him she wasn't entirely convinced he'd come to stay.

And she wasn't the only one. Of course, most of Berk had reacted to the news as expected of Berkians â€“ when the initial surprise had worn off, the grog had flowed free as the laughter in the mead-hall, and one would think it was an annual occurrence, coming back from the dead. Because that was, quite literally, what he'd done, though Stoick's no more wise than anyone else. But Berk has bred a long line of god-fearing vikings, and so perhaps it wasn't such a strange event for most to wrap their heads around. Old Gothi had taken one long look at him, pinched his arm and waved her hand about his face, and then been on her way with a different sort of wave, her litter of dragons nipping at her heels.

Then there was Gobber, who had, as Gobber often did, accepted the truth of the matter with his usual brand of inappropriately timed jokes, which â€“ for a man who'd known him as long as Stoick â€“ was a poor cover for his actual shock. But Stoick pretended not to notice the glances thrown in his direction from across the table, and found his attention drawn to Valka more oft than not.

She caught his next look, and held it the way only she could, with the eyes she'd given their boy â€“ the moss-green of an early Berk summer. There was a care there, not by choice perhaps but there regardless â€“ like he'd at any given moment fade away at her fingertips as quick as he'd been brought back. Her hands drifted, restless next to his own on the table, fingers searching out the beat of his pulse between breaths.

And it made him warier still, to find himself unable to provide her better assurances.

"What about Stoick the Imperishabâ€“"

"Oh, Odin's flaming _beard_, Gobber, I dun' need a new name!" He glared, but the blacksmith was unperturbed by the interruption, too used to his quick temper to cower like most would.

"Speaking of Odin's beard â€“ does he actually have one? I mean, we've always assumed."

Stoick rubbed at his brow, but a glance at Valka calmed his ire, for Gobber's words had chased the pensive look off her face, and a smile had bloomed along her cheeks, crinkling her eyes at the corners â€“ the lines another testament to the years he'd missed, but that didn't make them any less beloved on her face.

And then she laughed, the sound like bubbling up from her chest, and the tension in his shoulders â€“ another piece of evidence reminding him that he was _living_, now â€“ bled away, and he breathed a little easier. "One more suggestion and you'll get to see fer yerself," he warned, drawing his eyes away from his wife, but Gobber only grinned.

"I bet I'd stick 'round longer than _you_," he retorted. "What yeh did ta have Odin himself ship ya back ta this realm whole 'n hale is a little beyond me, but I shouldn't 'ave put it past yer stubbornness." He shook his head, and took a swig of his own flagon. "Fire and death can't kill yeh, but 'Stoick the Vast' is still what yer goin' with."

"It's a name that's suited me fine this far and it'll suit me fine a few decades more," Stoick said, eyes finding his wife's again, his look meaningful. "A little death dun' change that."

Her smile stretched warm and true along her mouth, and she leaned some of her weight against him, the gentle curve of her shoulder small and familiar against his arm. And she was like breathing, he realized â€“ her presence an old wound finally healing, and he wondered how he'd ever gone twenty years without her.

"So...no sign of yer boy, yet."

He glanced at Gobber and shook his head, lifting the flagon to his lips. It was good grog â€“ plainer than the one at Odin's table, but he shook the thought off as soon as it'd settled, uneasy at the prospect of coming back to find the realm of the living wanting in some way.

"Unless he's taken one of the other dragons, Toothless should have tracked him down by now," Valka spoke then, drawing him from his mind and back to the long table and the mead-hall and the living realm. She'd not spoken for a good while, and at once any thoughts of godlike delicacies and the everlasting day of Odin's hall seemed fickle things beside the warmth of her fingers curling around his wrist.

And as though her words had invoked it, the chatter in the hall lessened, and several heads turned towards the door to regard the young chief as he made his way inside, Astrid at his side and flanked by the aforementioned dragon. A round of cheers and greetings rose from the table, which the lad awkwardly waved off as he picked his way along the side of the long benches, politely refusing flagons of frothing ale pushed towards him and gingerly patting a few shoulders as he made for the far end of the room.

Stoick noticed the eyes first â€“ bloodshot, and redder still in the dim light of the mead-hall, and his brows furrowed at the sight. But he wasn't given so much as a chance to open his mouth before Valka's weight had disappeared from his side as she slid off the bench, quick-footed and graceful though her flagon was half-empty and she'd

not slept since his return.

Then she was before the boy, hands below his chin to lift his gaze so she could peer into his eyes. "Have you slept at all?"

"_Mom_â€"

"Not a wink," Astrid spoke up, crossing her arms as she threw his son a look that brought Stoick back twenty odd years, and to a wife waiting for him at dawn's first light after yet another night before the forge-fire. "It's a wonder he's still on his feet."

"Heyâ€"

"You'll fall asleep in the forge-fire if you keep this up," Valka scolded, and Toothless rumbled his agreement, cutting a sideways look at his rider.

Hiccup glared half-heartedly down at the drake. "Would you three quit ganging up on me? I thought I was the chief, doesn't that give me, oh I don't know, some leeway to decide my own bedtime?"

"Aye, but a wise chief listens to the women in his life," Stoick spoke up, drawing everyone's gazes, but he held his son's from across the table. "That's rule number five, and you'd know that, if you'd listened to the lessons a've tried to impart on you."

The mead-hall seemed to fall silent around them, and Gobber seemed to be holding his honest to Odin's breath, and for a moment Stoick wondered if the boy wouldn't take to the hills again. His son's dragon seemed to have the same idea, and took a seat at the boy's back, conveniently blocking his only exit, unless he felt desperate enough to crawl over the table. Valka was looking between them, unease in the restless shifting of her eyes.

Then Hiccup seemed to relax, and the grim set to his mouth softened to a smile. "I thought rule number five was never leave the Snoggletog planning to Gobber," he said at length, and Stoick couldn't help the grin.

Gobber laughed â€" the sound an explosion, breaking the lull. "Well, wha' d'you know, Stoick â€" summat made its way through that thick head of 'is."

"Yeah, well," Hiccup shrugged. "With the tougher materials you've gotta use the right hammer," he continued, a strange smile tugging at his mouth. "Lesson eight. Right, dad?"

Stoick laughed, and he found his pleasure reflected in Valka's easy smile. "That's m'boy!"

Another round of cheers answered his declaration, and Hiccup ducked his head â€" an oddly fond sight, after what felt like more than a month, and at the same time didn't. Time had been a different concept altogether in the realm of the Ætsir, and he'd not yet fully adjusted. He'd been back less than a day, but couldn't seem to decide whether it felt like an age or just a blink of an eye, but Stoick found it a relief that though some things had changed in his absence,

some still remained the same.

"Hey, dad?"

He looked up to find his son lingering at the head of the table, the din of the room like a wall at his back. And for the span of a moment he looked a boy again, having just come in from a ramble, boots filled with mud and twigs in his hair, babbling about adventures in the wild that had given Stoick nightmares for weeks of dragons carrying off his boy with no one there to see.

But mud-drenched boots notwithstanding, his boy wasn't so much a boy anymore, though he was shifting his feet like one. "So, uh. Sorry, for what I did earlier. Running off like that, it wasn't...my most shining moment," he admitted. He scratched the back of his head — one of the few traits he'd gotten from him and not from his mother, Stoick realized. "But, I'm here now, so...do you think we could, I dunno...talk?"

And he looked at the son he hadn't seen in a month — the spitting image of his mother down to the shape of his nose and the fire in his soul, but there was a new lift to his chin that hadn't been there before, and a proud set to his shoulders. He'd been chief just a few short weeks, but Stoick was surprised to see him looking the part, right down to the shadows beneath his eyes and the soot-smudges on his chin that told of long hours spent in the forge, and the soft crease between his brows that was testament to the grief of dealing with the village council.

But some of the rebellious dragonrider still remained, lurking in the depths of the eyes the identical pair to the ones in his wife's dear face, and Stoick was surprised to find himself relieved to see it.

He grinned. "Get some sleep, Hiccup," he said, clapping the lad on the shoulder, and considered it a small victory when his son didn't flinch or collapse beneath the weight, but rather looked surprised. And then he found a desperate hope kindling in the eyes looking up at him, reflected in the gaze at his back where his mother lingered.

And if Stoick the Vast and naught else (not for a good long while if he'd anything to say 'bout it!), couldn't yet make promises on behalf of the Allfather, there was one thing he knew with a certainty that would defy death and all the gods in Asgard if he'd so have to take the damn name as price for his defiance.

He smiled. "I'll be here when you wake."

* * *

><p>AN: Props if you spot the Tolkien-reference.</p>

Asgard: one of the nine realms and home to the Ætsir, ruled by Odin and Frigg.

4. A Storm Brewing

AN: So this thing is turning into a bigger project that I'd first

intended, but I hope you'll tag along for the ride. I'm having a world of fun writing it, and as always, your feedback really boosts my inspiration.

* * *

><p>part 4.

When he woke the sun was still up, and for a moment it threw him off, before he could gather his mind enough to remember why he'd gone to bed early in the first place. A snort to his right drew his attention, before a set of eyes entered his field of vision, and there was a fond word at the tip of his tongueâ€"

â€"when another, lolling tongue slapped against his face, and the greeting dissolved into a surprised noise of discontent. "_Urgh_ â€" Toothless!"

Wiping at his face, Hiccup pushed himself up, and attempted a half-convincing glare that only seemed to bounce off his partner's hide. Toothless tossed his head, motioning for the door, but Hiccup didn't feel very inclined to get out of bed, much less the house.

The dragon grumbled, eyes narrowing as he sensed his reluctance. Hiccup grimaced. "Just go talk to him, huh? It's that easy?"

Going by the answering growl, it was. With a sigh, he fell back against the furs, eyes finding the familiar lines of the ceiling beams he'd mapped out through the years. Toothless made a keening noise of complaint at his lack of response, before he shoved his nose into his rider's shoulder.

Angling his head, Hiccup offered a smile. "What do you say, bud? You ready for this adventure?"

Toothless gurgled in response â€" an affirmative sound, but then he hadn't seemed to have had any issues with his old man coming back. Hiccup sighed. "Yeah, well, that makes one of us." But off the bed he was, rolling his shoulders to work out the kinks that seemed to have taken up permanent residence since he'd taken up his new post as chief.

Making his way down the stairs to the hearth-room, he called out, "Mom? Are you home?" He hesitated. Then, "Dad? Oh man, that's weird." But there was no response, and he found the room empty when he descended, the hearth cold, and there didn't seem to have been anyone in the house since he'd gone back to take a nap.

"They're probably in the forge with Gobber," he said to Toothless, who responded with a rolling purr. He snorted. "Yeah, overwork runs in the family," he muttered as he made for the front door.

He hadn't been asleep long, judging by the sun's position in the sky, steadily sinking towards the horizon in the distance. The light cast a warm glow over the usually cold, grey waters around Berk, and he took a moment to watch the sprawl of sunlight across the curved rooftops, before he began his descent towards the village centre. A round of greetings followed in his wake as he made his trek between the houses, and he offered a few waves, mind too caught up with where

he was heading to make much of his surroundings. A nose pushed into the hand dangling at his side, and he ran his palm along the ridge on Toothless' head in wordless response.

Coming in sight of the forge, he spotted Gobber on his way out, a pair of clippers in one prosthetic hand and a hammer in the other.

"There y'are," the smith greeted, catching sight of him. "Was wondrin' if yeh'd plans to sleep through the whole day." He was given a look. "Better be well rested now, or yer dear ol' mother'll drag yeh back ta bed hersel'."

"I'm fine," he defended. "I'm rested. See?" He spread his arms, as if to gesture to his general person, but Gobber didn't look very convinced.

"If yeh say so," he said, nodding his head towards the construction at his back. "They're in the forge, if it's Stoick yer after."

Hiccup breathed out, "Yeah. Thanks, Gobber."

The blacksmith waved over his shoulder as he limped away, Grump lumbering at his heels like a small mountain, before he turned and with a, "And what d'you think yer doin, yeh overgrown ball o' lard? Who's to keep the fire burnin' if yer followin' me? Back to the forge with yeh!", sent the dragon trudging back. Hiccup patted its nose as it passed, and it purred low in its belly.

"Yeah, I feel you, buddy" he's always ordering me around, too." With a scratch behind one ear, he made to follow the dragon, but the greeting at the tip of his tongue faltered as he stepped inside the forge.

He heard the laughter before anything else " his father's rolling thunder, but overlapped by the soft trill he'd come to know as his mother's mirth, gentle and clear as the glasswork Gobber pretended to be too refined for a true blacksmith. There was a tune in the air, too" not the one he'd heard before, the one that told of savage seas and golden rings, but another, almost nonsensical thing, light and merry from his mother's lungs. And there were words woven with the song, telling of an endless sea of clouds and the freedom of the sky.

And then his father's gruff voice, picking up the words to weave the promise of a warm hearth-room and a fire always lit, to guide a restless rider home. And he wondered if they were making it up as they went, and if this was one of the many things he'd never known about the man who'd raised him.

There was a sudden clanking sound, and the hiss of fire in water followed by a burst of laughter, belly-deep and warm like the forge-room. Then his mother's voice, "Oh, careful you'll drop it", another peal of laughter, then, "Stoick, ye'll set the forge on fire. Or your beard would yeh" oh no, keep it 'way from me!" She shrieked, but her laughter followed close at its heels, wild and free the kind he hadn't heard since they'd gone flying together.

Hiccup lingered awkwardly in the doorway, unwilling, suddenly, to end the moment, thoughts caught and held by the memory of the short-lived

joy of having both his parents back, before Drago's army of dragons had descended on them all.

"Hiccup!"

He started, eyes focusing, to find his mother's smiling face before him, eyes bright and soot smudging the skin along her jaw and cheeks, flushed from the warmth of the fire. At the back of the forge loomed his father, rising tall as the ceiling, his beard aglow in the firelight.

He tried a grin. "Gobber making you two pick up the slack?" He glanced towards the back, and met his father's gaze. "Didn't you retire?"

Stoick's answering smile was a quick flash in the dim firelight. "Oh aye, but the perks of retirin' is more time in the forge, less grey hairs from dealing with runnin' the village."

"Yeah, thanks for that," Hiccup deadpanned, but there was a smile there, lurking at the corner of his mouth.

A mountain of unresolved things rested in the air between them, but Valka was the first to break the silence. "I'll go get cleaned up," she said, hand lingering against his cheek as she passed. She turned to look at Stoick. "I'll see you back at the house?"

He nodded, and she left on quick feet, a hand squeezing Hiccup's before she was out of the forge, leaving him with Stoick. Another long lull of silence descended over the room, thick like the smoke drifting out between the rafters.

"So...uh." Hiccup scratched the back of his head, fingers restless. "Here I am."

His father nodded, the gesture a little stiff. "So y'are."

Hiccup clenched his hands, then loosened them. "So," he began again, and wondered why he was having such a hard time breaching the subject. They'd never really been ones for talking, but it had never been this hard, even before Toothless had come into the picture.

He took a long look at him then the man who was his father returned from the dead, standing in the forge like he'd never left, like he hadn't been gone from their lives the whole turn of a moon and like he hadn't turned to ash before their very eyes.

"How's it like?" he blurted then, before he could stop himself. "Being...back," he finished lamely.

Stoick snorted as he grabbed a rag to wipe his hands. "Alive yeh mean?"

Hiccup grimaced at his own lack of tact. "Yeah. That."

Stoick paused, idly tracing the furrows in an unfinished breastplate that Gobber had been working on. And his eyes seemed far away for a second like he was looking at something else, or somewhere else. Something cold raced down Hiccup's spine, but he shook the feeling

off, and took a step closer â€“ to remind himself, maybe, that the towering bulk wouldn't vanish if he made any sudden movements.

He tried again, "So...you remember things, then? From...over there." He winced at his own inability to say it like it was, to speak the word that seemed stuck to the back of his throat, but he was still having problems wrapping his head around the concept of different realms and living, meddling gods.

He was given a look. "I was gone a month, not the blink of an eye. That's a long time in the Ætsir realm." Stoick paused. Then, "It sure felt like a long time, anyhow."

"Well," Hiccup coughed, and tried a faltering smile. "If it helps, it's only been a month here. I mean, it's been pretty hectic with the rebuilding andâ€“ and the chief thing, but other than that you haven't missed much."

His father looked at him then, and for a moment Hiccup felt strangely exposed. "I wouldn't say that," Stoick said, and there was a world behind that remark â€“ nine worlds, and a whole lot of things in between.

"I'm sorry."

Stoick looked up, a frown pulling his thick brows together, and Hiccup swallowed. "I'm...sorry," he repeated. "For everything. For...you dying. If I hadn't insisted on going after Dragoâ€“"

"You wouldn't have found yer mother."

His mouth snapped shut, and Stoick pressed on, "You can't predict the future, Hiccup. You've got to do what feels right. It's what'll make yeh a great chief." He smiled, and reached out to wipe a smudge off his son's forehead. "Once you get used to th' rhythm. And the late hours."

There was a lump in his throat, and he tried to swallow past it. He'd spent so many nights in the forge wondering if his father had been disappointed when he'd died, saving him from a direct result of his own mistake, of trying to talk sense into a man who'd been long past saving. Now that he'd been given another chance, and had his father returned and looking proud as he'd ever seen him, it all felt a little overwhelming.

"I'm going to ask Astrid to marry me!"

The moment the words left his tongue, he felt like clapping a hand over his face â€“ he'd meant to change the subject to something a little less morbid than death and a little less emotionally draining than his own guilt, but without sounding like he was one egg short of a nest.

The burst of laughter surprised him, and when he looked up Stoick was grinning. "Well it's about time!"

Hiccup did a double-take. "Wh-what do you mean _it's about time_?"

He was rewarded with a snort. "Kept 'er waiting five years â€“ young

or no', that's a while fer any lass, even one as patient as Astrid. I asked yer mother the year after I met 'er, you know."

Hiccup shifted his weight. "Yeah, well....I've had a lot on my mind, okay? And...it hasn't been the right time."

"Yer overthinking it."

"I'm notâ€"" he pressed his mouth to a determined line. "I'm not overthinking it, I'm just...planning. I've got a plan. Sort of." When all that met his excuses was a raised brow, he sighed, and raked a restless hand through his hair. His fingers lingered on the braids by his ear. "I just...she deserves something special. Like your song. She deserves something like that."

Stoick crossed his arms over his chest. "Astrid the type who'd appreciate you singin'?" Going by his tone, he found the idea somewhat dubious.

Hiccup didn't hesitate. "She'd choke on her own laughter."

His father laughed. "Then that's yer answer." He poked Hiccup's chest. "You've got to make it personal."

"Yeah, easy for you to sayâ€" you've done it already. Twice," he added, thinking of the day in the cave, and the look on his mother's face.

"Aye â€" charmed her boots off, too," his father retorted with a proud puff of his chest. He grinned. "Hard t' resist the Haddock charm."

Hiccup rubbed at his brow. "I don't think that's going to be enough this time, dad. I mean it's not like I can just pop theâ€""

"Gobber, have you seenâ€"oh, hey, babe, what are you doing up?"

He had to swallow the word from escaping as Astrid ducked into the forge-room, and sweat broke out across his back and shoulders at his near reveal. "Astrid! Hey, I, uhâ€" couldn't sleep any...more. I'm awake. As you can...see." He felt like hitting himself for his lack of foresight, practically screaming his intentions for the whole village to hear. Of course she'd be around this time of day â€" Gobber probably had her running errands.

But she didn't seem to have heard anything incriminating, and greeted his father as she came to stand beside Hiccup. "Did you at least get some rest?" she asked, looking into his eyes the way his mother had.

Before he could open his mouth, Stoick clapped him on the back, humour at his son's expense bright in his eyes. "That's my cue ta leave," he declared, and with a tip of his head to Astrid, made for the door. "Listen to the lass, son, and don't stay out too late â€" yer mother'll worry."

Then he was gone, and Hiccup felt like digging himself a hole. He'd tell his mother, no doubt, and then there'd be even more people waiting for it to happen than there already was, andâ€"

"What was that all about?"

He whipped around to face her. "W-what was what all about?"

She frowned. "That look he just gave you." She peered into his face. "Why are you sweating?"

He laughed nervously, "Ah, it's a little stifling in here. Don't you think it's a little stifling in here?" He wiped at his brow. "_Whew._ Gotta give Grump some credit for that molten fire, huh?"

She looked doubtful, but didn't push the matter, and Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief when she moved to douse the fire, running a hand over Grump's nose as she passed. Toothless lifted his head from where he'd settled, clever eyes narrowed knowingly, and Hiccup made a cutting motion with his hand.

"You're acting...weird. Are you sure you're okay?"

He hurriedly pulled his eyes away from the dragon to look back at Astrid, who was watching him like he'd gotten out of bed and put his shirt on inside-out and his boot on his peg leg.

And he thought then, about his parents in the cave, and in the forge just moments ago, singing and dancing after twenty years apart. And he looked at the girl by the forge-fire, blue eyes like the rare cloudless skies Berk only saw a few times a month.

And he found he wanted that ¯ the kind of romance that lasted, past separation and differences of opinion. The kind of romance that defied death, even. He wanted that, but it wasn't something you asked for over breakfast along with 'pass the butter, please'. He wanted to do something she'd remember, twenty years into the future. If not a song and dance, then something else.

The thought made him smile. It looked like he'd have to plan some more, if he wanted to get it right. She wasn't a girl who asked for much, or even one who put much value into those kind of gestures, but she was worth the effort of a damn good proposal ¯ he just needed to figure out what kind.

"I'm great!" he blurted, and watched her brows pull together at the sudden outburst. But his heart felt light in his chest for the first time in a good long while, and the exhaustion that had rested so heavy on his shoulders seemed to have lifted. "I've got the rest of the day off," he said then, fingers curling around hers to tug her closer, and her concern gave way to a single blonde brow raised in amusement. Hiccup grinned.

"So how about a race, milady?"

* * *

><p>Freyr's blessing lay over the rise of Berk in the gentle breeze and the cloudless evening, and the sun had dipped a molten ball of flame down into the sea by the time her husband made it home for the night.</p>

Valka had changed for bed and was fussing with the furs when she heard his step in the hearth-room, echoed by the heavy creak of the

floorboards and the lazy twitch of Cloudjumper's nose. Turning towards the door, her smile was a gentle thing, though her hands were restless against her braid, still damp from her bath and slung over one shoulder, the moisture soaking into her blouse.

For a moment he just looked at her, looming large and awkward in the doorway, as though unsure of whether or not to step all the way inside.

"Did you have a good talk?"

He seemed to start at the sound of her voice, and she saw his gaze return from somewhere far off, a realm of his own imaginings where she couldn't hope to tread. It brought the worry back, and the thought, however doubtful, that he longed for something the world of the living could not provide. Something she could not provide.

Then he smiled, and the fond crinkle of his eyes chased the ghosts of her thoughts away to remote corners. "We did." And he took a step inside. "Lad had a lot on his mind. He's like you, that way. Always been one fer thought."

Her smile grew. "You used to tease me merciless' about that," she said. "You'd say I did enough thinking fer the whole of Berk."

He grinned. "Aye â€“ you did." He paused. Then, "I missed yer thinkin'." He motioned to her face. "The way you'd worry yer lip 'tween yer teeth."

Her lower lip slipped out from where it had been caught, and he laughed. "Hiccup's the same," he said.

She felt something warm unfurl behind the cage of her ribs at the fondness in his voice, and breathed in deeply. He smelled of forge-smoke and metalwork and the salt of the sea, and it drove it home once again â€“ the realization that he was no apparition but whole and hale and human. He'd been home less than a day, still, but she'd not yet wrapped her mind around it fully.

His gaze found the dragon curled around their bedpost, but Cloudjumper didn't twitch, or open his eyes. Valka reached out a hand, fingers finding the ridges along his spine. "He's been keepin' me company," she said then, answering the unspoken question. She looked at Stoick. "It's been...strange, sleeping here, and after twenty years I've become used to his presence."

Clever eyes opened to meet hers, before the dragon rose, wings tucked close to his great frame as he made for the door, seeming to draw her thoughts from within her. Her hands travelled along his spine, and Stoick stepped out of the way, but didn't take his eyes off the dragon before the swish of his great tail disappeared around the door-frame.

"Shrewd, that one."

Valka glanced up, surprised, but found his smile fond, and her own smile bloomed in turn. "Aye, he is." Her fingers curled around her braid, tugging, and her nervousness roiled like a whirlpool in her belly.

"I don't remember you bein' this nervous, even the night we married," he said then, as he took another step inside, pulling the door shut behind him. "And you were a young thing back then, Val. Fresh off yer mother's apron strings, nearly, but not near so jittery." He gave her a look. "You know, if I remember, you were eager."

Valka snorted. "If you remember, Stoick the Vast-as-you-please, I'd had quite a bit of ale in me that eve," she quipped, her good humour falling easily from her lips, and the whirlpool stilled, the fjord of her inner being suddenly quiet.

His smile warmed, softened, and when he took another step towards her she didn't flinch. "I remember you being the most beautiful sight I'd e'er seen."

She drew a breath, sudden and sharp, and then she was in the cave again and he was before her, and twenty years had been long and cold and lonely indeed, and she felt tears spring unbidden to her eyes. She laughed â€œ a watery sound. "Oh, look at this. I'm a right mess."

He reached out a hand to catch a tear before it escaped, and she thought about her song in the forge, and his promise solid like the crag of Berk. But he said nothing, and moved then to take off his armour â€œ the gilded plates not wrought by mortal hands but Odin's forge, but he discarded them with little care. Only on his helmet did his hands linger, before he put it down with the rest.

Then he went to the bed to pull the furs aside, and suddenly the twenty years that had passed since they'd last shared one seemed long indeed, and the month she'd spent in the company of her own kin seemed but a moment. And she felt a lass again, the chief's young wife, uncertain in the ways of affection.

He smiled then, knowing her thoughts for what they were. "Sleep, Val," he said, eyes glittering with mischief. "There'll be time enough to be married again in the morn."

She balked, and spluttered â€œ her laughter wild birds in the soft silence, and her nervousness lifted. "Oh, you fiend! Talk as tho' you're a lad!" But her stomach fluttered, the quiet waters rippling with affection, and when he settled in she hesitated only a breath before she followed suit.

The bed seemed smaller, as though by magic, and her breath came a little easier as she tucked the furs about her, the familiar dip of his weight making her roll naturally towards the middle. And her happiness was sudden and violent, a surge in her throat, but her words were stuck to the roof of her mouth and all she could do when he looked towards her, a question in his kind eyes, was rest her hand over the soft rise of his chest. The beat of his heart drummed a hammer-fall against her palm, and curling her fingers around the braids of his beard, she tucked her head under his chin, the movement an ease she'd thought the years had driven out of her.

An arm curved carefully about her shoulders, not a dragon's tail but familiar still, and when she relaxed so did he. A kiss against her hair, still damp and bound to be a right mess in the morn, tugged at heartstrings long dulled â€œ a keen note resonating in the quiet of

her soul.

And for the very first night since Berk had called her back beneath its curved and carven rooftops, sleep came on swift hooves to Valka.

* * *

><p>"Sweet Gefn, how very gracious you are."

The voice slithered, coiling and soft â€“ the supple leather sheath over cold steel, and eyes flashed bright in the eve's gentle light. Son, brother and father of many he sat, perched like a bird, a great drake against the backdrop of starlit shadow. His mirth ran thrilling rivers through veins of ice and blood, and in his observance his boredom lifted, just a little, from his weary shoulders.

Loki tilted his head, the dark of his hair the soot-black of a raven's wing, stark against his ever-shifting complexion. And he considered her handiwork, the Lady of love and all things fair and sweet. "Such fondness you have for these humanfolk."

He looked upon the crag of Berk, such a tiny little speck in the vast blue realm of Midgard, though these were folk who knew their names, and invoked them in fear and reverence alike, the Allfather's more than any. Loki has not known the same honour. Liesmith they've called him. Thief and Silvertongue.

Mischief maker.

"And as you invoke it, so it shall be," he mused, his wicked smile a snake curling about the length of his clever mouth. His passing was quiet â€“ the shifting of a single shadow, and Berk rested, forever peaceful in its oblivion and its lack of understanding of the great powers roiling like the traitorous waters of the northâ€“

â€“like great waves to soon crash upon the shore.

* * *

><p>AN: Boredom is an inevitable fate amongst gods, and Loki never passes up the opportunity to wreak some havoc.<p>

****Freyr**:** twin brother of Freyja, known as the god of virility and fair weather.

****Midgard**:** one of the nine realms of norse cosmology, and home of humans.

****Gefn**:** another of Freyja's names, pertaining to her as a giver/granter of gifts.

5. Silvertongue

AN: Lovely comments make my day and spur my inspiration, so here's another chapter for you, kind readers! I hope the plot's intrigued you this far, and that you'll enjoy the continuation.

* * *

><p>part 5.

"Astrid Hofferson. Please be myâ€"nah, that's not right."

He turned, raking a hand through his hair as he chewed on his lip for thought. A pace away, Toothless watched with curious eyes and a tilt to his head that Hiccup recognized as amusement. "Don't look at me like that â€" this is harder than it looks."

The dragon gurgled, and Hiccup glared. "Okay, so how's this, then?" He cleared his throat. "Astrid, we've known each other for a while and we've been together five years, andâ€" _what_?"

Toothless gave him a look. "It's too long? Fine. Uh, what about this? Astrid." He puffed out his chest. "Be my wife."

The dragon's expression didn't twitch, and Hiccup groaned. "Wha-at? It's assertive, it's determined â€" she likes that kind of thing."

Toothless made a sound at the back of his throat â€" the kind that told Hiccup he was kidding himself. The dragon had made a lot of similar complaints when he'd first started developing his flight suit, but though that had turned out a successful venture in the end, there was something about this particular pursuit that felt like he was destined to mess it up.

And it was all a bit of a mess, really. The easiest way would have been to ask his father or hers, as was the tradition, but they'd been together five years and he doubted she'd appreciate him going through her parents to ask her hand in marriage, tradition be damned.

He glanced at Toothless then, an idea forming in his mind as he stepped closer, a hum in his breast, rising upwards, _"I'll swim and sail on savage seas,"_ he began, as he tried to mimic the melody he'd heard his father whistle. _"With ne'er a fear of drownin'!"_

The dragon grimaced, and Hiccup threw his hands up. "Oh, come on! My dad â€" my enormous, burly, 'I eat skinny lads like you for breakfast' father can pull off a song and dance, but I can't?"

Toothless crooned, and tossed his head with a look. "Oh, oh _really_? _I'm_ not that romantic? Are you listening to yourself? Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds?"

The dragon grinned a toothless smile, flicking his tail for good measure, but Hiccup wasn't one to be cowed. "Oh, I see how it is. Well,_ too bad_, buddy, 'cause I can't keep this romance contained." Advancing on his friend with a grin, the tune was at the tip of his tongue again, _"But I will bring you rings of gold, and even sing you poetry, and Iâ€"_"

"Won't sing another infernal note, if you still want the lady to accept your offer."

He whirled around at the voice, and Toothless jerked as though struck, and the thought registered somewhere at the back of his mind that the dragon hadn't sensed the person's approach. "Whoâ€""

The words froze, stuck to the roof of his mouth as though by someone else's wish, and he watched, wide eyed as a figure stepped out of the morning shadows, the mist curling around the heels of dark boots like it was part of him. For it was a man, though his features were almost too fine, with raven-black hair braided back from a pale face in which sat a pair of keen eyes — not the moss-green of Berk's sprawling forests but an unnatural serpent's shade belonging to rare gems, the likes of which not found in any mortal realm. A tunic black as shadow wrapped about a lean frame, and there was a permanent grin hiding at the corners of a thin mouth.

He looked like no viking Hiccup had ever seen, and he'd know, having been the odd one out in Berk for the better part of his childhood. He wore no armour and carried no visible weapon, and the supple leather of his jerkin was too soft for anything but decoration.

The smile curled, a flash quick as a snake's bite. "My apologies for startling you, young chief. Sometimes I forget that your ears are not so keen."

Hiccup didn't move, but glanced towards Toothless, who was watching the stranger with his ears pressed flat against his skull — a sure a sign as any that something was wrong. "Not as keen as what, exactly?" he asked.

The smile didn't falter. "Why, those of a god, of course." He didn't twitch or make a single movement, and Hiccup had the bizarre impression that the air seemed to mould itself around his form. "And I'd know. I've spent many years in the halls of the great, walking unseen pathways in the dark, beyond immortal eyes and ears." He tilted his head, and amusement flickered in his cold gaze. "I must confess, you humanfolk don't prove much of a challenge."

"We kind of try not to be," Hiccup said warily, but his light words did little to ease the tension that seemed to drum through the earth underfoot. He could almost feel Toothless' rigid stance from where he stood, and hoped the stranger wouldn't make any sudden movements. Unarmed or not, he reeked of danger — the kind that made him regret not telling anyone where he'd gone off to. Even with a dragon there was a thought at the back of his mind like an itch, that said Hiccup was the one with the lower odds.

He swallowed thickly. "Actually, I can assure you we want no trouble with...your kind."

A dark brow rose smoothly. "My kind? Do you fear the word so much, you cannot even speak it?"

Hiccup clenched his jaw. "Gods," he said then.

The man — god — smiled. "Such cheek," he mused. "It's easy to see why Valfreyja favours you."

Hiccup didn't ask, though he was quite clearly meant to by the phrasing of that sentence. But he'd had enough of meddling gods and foreign realms to last him a lifetime, though that obviously didn't seem to stop them. "And which one would you be, then?" he asked, boldly, wondering if he'd grow bored if he didn't cower like he was

no doubt supposed to. Berk was full of vikings who feared the gods about as much as they worshipped them, but Hiccup had never put much faith in either practice.

Even now, with one of them standing not a stone's toss away from him.

"You doubt, still," the stranger said, turning suddenly to take a casual step towards the ledge overlooking the archipelago of sprawling little isles and trees bare from the early winter's cold. "But then, our names have never fallen easily from your lips." He shifted, and the mists seemed to follow. "I'll give you some names," he said then, hands clasped behind his back. "Perhaps you might have heard some of them? Your kind is a particularly inventive race." He grinned, but it was a cold thing, and dread settled like a stone in Hiccup's stomach.

"Wolf-father," he spoke then, the name falling like a weight in the morning silence. "Cunning one. Hawk's offspring. Thief of gods and giants. Betrayer. Silver舌 and Liesmith."

"Loki," Hiccup breathed then, though he was having a hard time wrapping his head around it. Of all the gods to seek him out, it was the Trickster himself. The maker of mischief whose name the mothers of Berk had thrown at the heels of misbehaving children for as long as he could remember.

"Do you doubt now, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, Chief and Dragonmaster of Berk?" The title was a mockery on his tongue, and Toothless growled restlessly at Hiccup's side.

"Easy, bud," he murmured under his breath, eyes still on the man before him. The man claiming to be an immortal god, who walked and talked like he belonged somewhere else entirely — somewhere far past the reach of mortal hands.

"Look," he tried. "I don't know why you're here, or why you've come to me!"

"You can't be completely ignorant to the changes you've made in the weave," Loki spoke then, a frown drawing his brows together, though there was no wrinkle on the ageless face looking back at Hiccup.

"The...what?" he shook his head. "I don't know what you're asking."

"Your family," Loki continued calmly, as though Hiccup hadn't spoken at all. "Has long been favoured by the Ætsir. There's been battles fought for your souls. In fact, your whole existence, your feeble little human life, was wrought by the hands of one of the Vanir."

Hiccup frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Loki smiled, but seemed set on dismissing every response. "I've decided to take an interest, as well. Seems there must be something to your bloodline, to warrant such ardent watchfulness from my kith and kin." The last was spoken with a sardonic edge, and all the while he'd started to take deliberate steps towards Hiccup.

"Hey, hold on," he tried again, holding his hands up. "Whatever bone you've got to pick with your friends, I'd appreciate it if you left me and my family out of it."

Loki laughed. "Whether you like it or not, little chief,_ you and your family play a key part in the great world weave. It's a little too late for anonymity now. And me? Why, I'm simply adding my bets to the pool." He smirked, raising his hand in a flourish. "To...liven things up."

Before Hiccup could open his mouth and ask what he meant by that, there was movement behind him, and he froze, recognizing the sound of a great weight shifting against the moss and stones underfoot. He'd spent the better part of five years listening for that sound while making his map. But the word seemed to have lodged somewhere at the bottom of his throat.

"Did you think your kind were the only ones with wings at your disposal?" Loki asked then, and Hiccup didn't have to turn around to know what kind of creature loomed behind him. Toothless' bared teeth and twitching tail said enough, but turn he did, eyes widening as he let his gaze travel the ridged line of a scaled belly and neck.

"This is Halfwyrm. He hails from Hel's realm. One of her finest, given to me as a gift." He hummed. "Such a thoughtful child, that one."

Hiccup could only watch, mouth agape as a dragon rose from the mist, true to its name in its twisted dual nature â€“ a drake half of flesh and shadow-black scales, and half of winter-white bone. One unseeing eye-socket and one eye like a garnet gem regarded him from a muzzle that defied nature's laws just by existing. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the sight, impossible as it was, but he refused to rub at his eyes like a child, to see if he wasn't dreaming.

Panic settled then, pushed its way up his throat like bile, and without another thought he scrambled for Toothless, hands reaching for the saddle. Immortal beast or not, he'd yet to meet anything that could out-fly a Night Fury, and he'd have to bet everything that that also went for mythical, undead dragons.

But he hadn't gotten two steps before he was intercepted â€“ a great tail, a grotesque weave of flesh and bone, swooped out to knock his legs from under him, landing him on his back with enough force to knock the breath clean from his lungs. He heard Toothless' roar of protest, but didn't have time to so much as lift his head before a set of talons clamped down over his midriff. A shout was at the tip of his tongue, but it was swallowed by the roar of the wind as he found himself plucked from the ground.

From his skewed perspective, he watched the crag grow smaller and smaller as they rose into the air, the only sound heralding their departure the tell-tale, keening roar of a Night Fury. And Hiccup's own voice, a hoarse scream in his ears, cutting through the wind and the blood pounding against his skullâ€"

"_**Toothless!**_

* * *

><p>"Stoick?"<p>

He looked up from where he sat, whittling away at a block of wood by the hearth, to find his ladywife in the doorway. Her hands were damp, and her shift soaked to the elbows with wash-water. A rosy flush was evident in her cheeks, and irritation shone bright in her eyes. "Did Hiccup say when he was coming home? There's no getting this thrice-cursed spit out of that jerkin o' his, and I'm one bar o' soap away from throwin' the whole of it in the fire!"

He shook his head, though a smile pulled at his mouth at her state. "Lad was gone 'fore the sun rose. Took Toothless with 'im." He gave her a look. "A lot like his mother tha' way â€“ running off to wild places."

She pursed her lips, but her smile betrayed her irritation. "A fair point," she conceded. Her eyes flickered to what he held between his palms. "What've you got there?"

He grinned, and held it out as she came to stand before him. It wasn't looking like much â€“ not yet, but a few more rounds with the knife and it would look likeâ€“

"A dragon?" she asked, wonder in her voice as she accepted it from his hands. She turned it over, fingertips tracing what was going to be an intricate carving of scales. She raised a brow. "Expecting wee ones soon, are you? They've not wed yet," she reminded him, but joy crinkled her eyes at the corners even as she spoke.

Stoick laughed. "Never hurts t' be prepared!"

She shook her head fondly, but her gaze lingered on the wooden dragon held in her hands, and Stoick watched as a far-off look came into her eyes. And he remembered the vicious curses upon his tongue, in a time the creatures had been the living bane of his existence.

And he remembered his young wife, and her pleas for peace to always fall upon deaf ears.

His hand closed over hers, caging the dragon between her cupped palms, and she started at the contact, mind drawn from somewhere else. His smile was soft. "I wish it could've been like this, Val. Back then."

Her smile trembled. "Oh, don't say that," she scolded. "It was wartime, then, and you'd not been chief long." She sighed. "And I...I was young and reckless, still. And we'd thought there'd be no children," she added, after a lull. "He was a surprise, our lamb."

He let his hand lower, to rest his hand over the gentle mound of her stomach. "Aye, but a dearly welcome one."

She grinned, a sudden, wild thing. "And bless Freyja's patience with my persistence for that!" She hesitated, before adding softly, "If I'd only done better in honouring her gift."

She placed the wooden dragon back into his hand, fingers curling small and soft against his, before she leaned down to brush her lips

against his forehead, until it smoothed of his worries. "If there are wee ones to be had, you'll be a favourite, I wager," she said then. "You're a good father, Stoick." She smiled, fingers curving gently against his whiskered cheek. "And you'll be a better grandfather, yet. More so than I'm a wife," she added with a snort, and a grumble, "Can't even get stains out of leather." But there was humour in her eyes, and he laughed, tugging her close.

"A good thing I didn't marry yeh for yer cleanin', then," he said with a grin.

"Or my cooking," she added. "And I can assure yeh twenty years with dragons haven't exactly made a chef of me." She tugged at one of his whiskers. "And on that note, should I go fetch Gobber to cook for supper?" she asked, a twinkle in her eyes, and he laughed heartily, but his response was interrupted by a hammering on the front door.

They both glanced towards it. "Invoke it and it'll come true," he said instead, and Valka rolled her eyes as she made to greet whoever came knocking.

"It's open," she called. "Tho' if you're lookin' fer the chief, I'll have to disappoint you."

The door was shoved inwards then, admitting Astrid, face flushed and out of breath and looking for all the nine realms like she'd run the length of Berk and back. "Astrid," Valka greeted, worry creasing her brow. "You're in a might hurryâ€" "

"It's Hiccup!" she breathed, shoulders heaving as she leaned her weight on the door. "I just got backâ€" Toothlessâ€" "

Stoick had risen from his seat, and was beside his wife. "What's happened?"

She raised her gaze, and there was a worry there he'd not often seen in the lass, who was usually more level-headed than the lot of her peers combined. "He's gone!"

"Gone?"

She drew a breath, eyes drawn to Valka. "No one knew where he was, and so I took Stormfly to have a look. I found Toothless, but he was alone and he's freaking out, and Stormfly couldn't even pick up his scent!" she rambled. "It's like he justâ€" "

"Disappeared," Stoick finished for her.

She looked at them then, and now there was fear bright and sharp in her eyes. "There were prints," she said then, catching her breath. "Big ones, but they're strange, like it's two different feet? I'm pretty sure it's a dragon, but I can't decipher what kind â€" Hiccup's usually the one who does that, andâ€" "

"Astrid," Valka put a hand on her shoulder. "Breathe. I'm sure he's fine. Hiccup knows dragons. If it's a new breed, he'll know what he's doing."

The blonde shook her head. "But why would he leave Toothless behind?"

It doesn't make any sense, and there's no trace of whatever he flew off with." Stormfly couldn't smell anything, and I tried getting Toothless to show me which direction it went, but..." she trailed off. She ran a restless hand through her fringe, drawing it away from her eyes. "I mean, how do you just vanish out of thin air? If he'd fallen, Toothless would have" but he didn't" he couldn't have"" She looked at Valka, eyes wide. "How do you just disappear like that?"

Valka opened her mouth, but closed it soon after with a shake of her head. Her earlier calm was gone, and worry creased her brow now.

"I know someone who might know th' answer," Stoick said then, breaking the lull of silence.

Before either could question what he meant, he turned to make for the door, but Valka followed close at his heels, hands grasping for his arm to halt him. "Stoick? Where are you going?"

"To th' only one with sure ties to the other realms," he answered, as he moved past a bewildered Astrid in the doorway.

Valka frowned, but didn't let go of his arm. "Other realms?" Then her eyes widened. "You think this is a god's work?"

His hands clenched against his sides. The wooden dragon rested in his grip still, the uneven edges cutting into the skin of his palm. "It's my best guess. It's no' unlikely my return's drawn the wrong sort of attention."

Valka shook her head. "But who do we kno' tha"" she stopped when he glanced back at them, his look meaningful, and it was Astrid who breathed out, realization dawning to chase the worry off her face.

"Gothi!"

* * *

><p>He knew her by the flicker of the lamplight, the golden flames suddenly aglow with her fury, and the blaze threw his darkened chamber into luminous light. And it was not the lady of love and grace who came before him now, but she who covets war and battle, her bare feet like Thor's thunder on the tiled floors and her golden hair a whirlwind about her beautiful face, her features drawn in anger and her eyes the grey steel of a blade's edge. But Loki did not raise his gaze to regard her as she descended upon him.</p>

"Where have you sent him?"

He allowed a single breath to pass before he glanced up, an easy smile on his face, though there was no humour in her eyes cold as the Fimbulwinter itself. "Valfreyja," he greeted, rising smoothly from his seat. "In my house and hall. What a pleasant surprise."

She bared her teeth, sharp like a feline's. "Loki Laufeyspawn, you will spare me your pleasantries, and tell me this instant!"

"Is this how you speak to the Allfather, when you visit him?" he asked. "Your manners could use some work. I've met humans with more

grace."

"They are not yours to play with, Loki," she snapped, the whip of her voice hard in the quiet of his chamber.

He raised a brow. "Oh no? Only yours then?" He slunk closer. "And the Allfather's, of course. A little unfair, don't you think?"

"Where have you sent him?" she repeated.

He grinned. "You mean you can't see him? How curious."

"I am not in the mood for your tricks, Liesmith. You will tell me where you sent him." And the gentle softness of her countenance hardened to battle mail, and her voice fell, heavy with a fury so often acquainted to the Allfather himself. But she would not let him forget that War was her mistress also, and that her eternal field was not one of flowers.

"My Lady, calm your anger." A cat's vicious hiss was at the tip of her tongue, but he slid, graceful about her shape like a snake. "It's only for a bit of fun. These humans live such awfully dull lives, I felt the need to step in. And I wished to test the merit of this beloved boy chief of yours. See if he's every bit as intriguing as you make him out to be."

"Bite your silver tongue, Trickster," she snapped. "Or I'll tear it from your cursed mouth, if the next words off it aren't the ones I wish to hear. Where have you sent him?"

His smile was a serpent's venom, and his humour glittered in eyes not cold but warm with the humour of the condemned as he leaned down, until he could feel the heat rising from her flushed cheeks. And though the next word off his traitorous tongue was the truth she'd demanded he relent, it made her veins run cold with the dark promise embedded in its voicing.

"_JÃ¶tunheimr._"

* * *

><p>AN: The cat analogies is a reference to Freyja's chariot, which is said to be pulled by two cats. Like I've said before, I'm taking some liberties with these mythical beings, to make them my own for the sake of this story.</p>

Freyja's field: FÃ³lkvangr is the afterlife ruled by Freyja, where half of those that die in battle go. Where Valhalla is a grand hall, FÃ³lkvangr is described as a field.

JÃ¶tunheimr: one of the nine realms of norse cosmology, and home of the frost- and rock giants. It's separated from Asgard by the river Ã•fingr.

Loki's names: Loki is known as the father of many creatures and people, amongst which are **Hel**, the Queen of Helheimr, Odin's eight-legged horse **Sleipnir**, the Midgard Serpent **JÃ¶rmungandr** and **Fenrir**, a great wolf. He's also known for being a bit of a pickpocket, and a general smooth-talker, hence what is a rather impressive list of epithets.

Loki's dragon: a reference to the way Hel is described in some sources, with one half of her face that of a beautiful woman's, and the other half a naked skull. I also chose the name 'Halfwyrm' as a nod towards Loki's notoriously ambiguous nature and divided loyalties.

6. JÃ¶tunheimr

AN: My apologies for the delay; life got a little busy, but I hope it's worth the wait!

* * *

><p>part 6.

She was out the door running past the former chief before the name had fallen fully from her lips, despite her breath still coming short to her lungs from her earlier run.

The village elder's hut sat high above the other houses like an eagle's perch, but before they could cross the village centre Gobber hailed them down. He'd stepped out of the mead-hall, and Astrid made a brief note of the lack of villagers, and the noise coming from the hall.

Stoick waved him off. "I dun' have time right now, Gobber, weâ€"

"Oh, if it's about the lad gone missing, you've time for this," he interrupted, nodding towards the mead-hall at his back, where a murmur of voices rose like a steady tide, now that Astrid knew to listen for it.

"But we need to speak to Gothi. Can't this wait?" Impatience drummed along her veins on nervous feet, but the blacksmith didn't seem to be quite as concerned about the situation. If anything, he seemed a bit...off. Weird."

"It could, but I dun' think you'll want ta keep her waitin'," he said. "And the old hag's in there, anyhow, if it's her yer after."

Valka frowned. "Keep who waiting, Gobber?"

The smith looked between them, before shaking his head. "You all better see this fer yerselves," he muttered, as he waved them inside, and any further protests Astrid had were lost at the sight of what appeared to be the whole of Berk gathered in the hall.

"She showed up earlier out o' the blue," the blacksmith said, wonder in his voice. "Said she was lookin' fer Stoick, and that she had news on the lad." He shrugged. "Dun' look at me; I didn't even kno' he was missin'."

The one Gobber spoke of sat at the head of the table furthest in, unmistakable amongst the vikings present. It was a woman, though Astrid found it hard to determine whether she was young or old or even of middle age. But she was beautiful, and striking in her white

dress and warrior's gilded regalia, hair like spun gold and wild about her shoulders, her bare feet bloodstained and red like her grinning mouth.

"Stoick the Vast," she greeted fondly, as one would greet an old friend, and she rose from her seat to meet them on their approach. Her smile was kind beneath her cat's grey eyes, and amusement winked in their depths. "Or do they call you other names, now?"

To Astrid's surprise, the retired chief laughed. "My Lady Valfreyja." He bowed his head in return, and a stunned hush fell over the crowd at the show of familiarity — and, Astrid guessed, the revelation of the woman's identity. Her own tongue seemed to have glued itself to the back of her teeth, and she couldn't speak for the life of her.

She turned to Valka next. "And yours is a face I know well," she said, as she came to stand before her, and Astrid was startled to see she did not rise as tall as Hiccup's mother, though her presence alone gave a different impression entirely.

Valka offered a careful greeting in return, which prompted a laugh from the fair-haired woman. "Such formality! And here I would consider us friends, after so many years."

Hiccup's mother didn't seem to know quite how to respond to that, and so Astrid stepped forward. "You're Freyja," she said, swallowing heavily, and tried not to feel intimidated; she'd sought her counsel more often than the Allfather's, and there was a sense of knowing there, as one might know a distant relative from rumour and hearsay.

The goddess — and how strange that was to admit, Astrid marvelled — smiled, and nodded her head. "I am."

"And you know where he is," Astrid continued, gaining confidence. "Hiccup. You know who took him. That's why you're here."

Another nod. "Yes."

"Who?" It was Valka who spoke, a hard note in her voice Astrid hadn't heard since the business with Drago.

"An old thorn in my side," Freyja answered, voice sharp but weary with long lingering annoyance, as she turned to face Hiccup's mother. "You know him as the Trickster. He's taken the boy to Jötunheimr." She pursed her lips. "His idea of a game, I guess you could say."

"Loki?" Stoick growled. "That bedamned whelp. I'll have him strung up by his braids from the Odin's cursed tree!"

"Jötunheimr?" Valka asked, voice a hush now, though her anger lurked behind her words, a quiet storm to her husband's fire.

"Isn't that...?" Gobber trailed off.

"The realm of giants," Freyja asserted. "It's no joking matter; there is tension enough between our kind and theirs to do without involving humans." She looked at Stoick next. "I cannot set foot there, but I

can show you the way, if you will come."

The former chief didn't hesitate. "I'll go."

Chaos broke out over the crowd gathered — protests from one corner, and a rousing cry of support from another. Freyja smiled. "I thought as much."

"Not alone you won't," Astrid spoke up then, as she stepped forward. "I'm going, too."

"And I," Valka agreed.

"Val."

She rounded on her husband. "No, Stoick. I'll not sit here, _idle_ like some—"

"I know," he said, cutting her off, and her brows drew together in a frown. "I told yeh — we're a _team_ now." His hand fell heavy upon her shoulder with promise, and his grin was wide and defiant on his face, and Astrid was surprised to find so much of Hiccup in that look. "If we're stormin' the realm of giants, we're doin' it together."

A roar of approval met his words now, not just from one corner but several, and villagers flocked around to offer their good luck, and wishes for safe passage and a hasty return with their missing chief.

"Well, I guess we can't let you have all the fun," Snotlout said, Fishlegs and the twins at his heels as he came to stand next to Astrid. He flexed one arm, and offered a rather lewd wink. "If your name's going down in history, babe, I want mine next to it."

Ruffnut snorted. "On the list of casualties, maybe." She offered Astrid a quick grin. "I've gotta see that. Count me in."

"Count us _both_," Tuff added, with a glare in his sister's direction. "Stop trying to hog all the glory."

"I'm not hogging anything—"

"So, to JÃ¶tunheimr it is, then?" Gobber whistled over the sound of the bickering twins, scratching his moustache. "Yeh can put that on the list of things I never thought I'd say."

A gentle hand on his shoulder made him start, but the lady of the eternal field only offered a smile. "Berk's finest warriors will have little trouble. Know that I would not seek your aid lightly."

Gobber nodded, a little numbly. "So...how do we get there, exactly?" he asked, as the goddess made for the door, the eyes of all gathered in the hall following the fall of her bare feet with silent rapture.

She glanced over her shoulder, brow quirked. "We fly," she said simply, before she turned to disappear outside, the sunlight swallowing her in a halo, golden as her hair.

"Sweet," Snotlout agreed, as he made to follow. "I'll go saddle the old girl."

Astrid shook her head, but followed suit, and the rest fell in step behind her. She could hear Gobber questioning the wisdom of sending so many off at once, to which Stoick replied that he was more than welcome to stay behind.

_ "Ho_ no!" came the quick answer. "Yeh've already had one adventure across the realms without me. Don't think I'm lettin' yeh run off on yer own this time."

She thought she detected a wavering note in his voice, but didn't allow her mind to linger long. Her own worry crept up like an itch under her skin, and she quickened her pace to follow Freyja, who was waiting now in the village centre.

Toothless met her halfway, restless, but seeming to sense something in the works. She scratched behind his ear. "We'll find him, bud," she murmured, to which he responded with a crooning rumble low in his throat. "Will you be riding with us?" Astrid asked the goddess, standing a pace off and looking up at the sky. "I'll be flying Hiccup's dragon â€“ you can ride on Stormfly, if you want." She gestured to her Nadder, eagerly buffing her wings as though sensing an impending flight.

Freyja smiled, and shielded her eyes against the sun's glare. "Oh, I have my own means," she said. "But I thank you for your consideration."

Astrid was about to ask what kind of means she was referring to, when the glare suddenly brightened, and she looked up, half expecting the sun to come plummeting down from its place in the sky, only to have her breath catch in her throat at the sight that greeted her instead.

A dragon descended towards them, appearing as if it was a manifestation of the air itself, and she had to shield her eyes against the glitter of bright, golden scales as it came to land next to Valfreyja. It was a small thing â€“ not much bigger than Stormfly, but with shorter legs and a long, graceful tail. Up close it was hard to tell if her scales were gold, or if she was simply reflecting the sun, but it hurt the eyes looking directly at her and so Astrid had to focus on something nearby. Once her vision had cleared of bright spots, she noted the jutting scales lining the ridge of a curved back before circling its brow, below which sat a pair of clever eyes.

The dragon crooned, and nudged its head against Freyja's side â€“ a fond greeting that was met with an affectionate rub. "SÃ³lscale will show the way," Freyja announced, running a hand along the dragon's flank. Around her, the village had gone quiet. "You may follow her lead, but at a distance. Her scales are too warm to touch for mortal hands."

"Unidentified class," Fishlegs murmured raptly under his breath, eyes round with wonderment. "Level unspecified. Limit break? Possibly. Legendary type, doubtless."

There was a low whistle to Astrid's right. "That is one fine piece of tail," Snotlout seconded, but she wasn't about to ask whether he

meant the goddess or the dragon.

Around them, the others were getting ready; Hiccup's parents had saddled their dragons, and the villagers had gathered around, giving them a wide berth â€“ Freyja's dragon in particular. Astrid checked the buckles on Toothless' saddle; she hadn't had time to remove it after his last flight â€“ she'd been too busy in her dash to find the Haddocks. She patted his back. "I'll give you a rubdown when we come home," she promised, and found it easier, somehow, to hold onto that than her own promise of bringing Hiccup home. It seemed within reach, anyhow â€“ more so than fetching someone from another realm.

She looked towards the others. "Are we all set toâ€?"

"What's going on here?"

The voice drew their collective attentions, and Astrid looked up to find Eret, just come back from a hunt going by the deer slung over his shoulder. Depositing the carcass on the ground, the former dragontrapper threw a wary look over the gathered villagers â€“ a month in their company hadn't yet warmed him to Berk's antics, and it would take some time yet, by the suspicious frown on his face.

Astrid made a split-second decision, and smiled. Turning to her Nadder, who looked disgruntled now that she'd realized she wasn't going to get to come along, she called out, "Stormfly â€“ fetch!"

The dragon crooned, and made a dash for the warrior, who nearly tripped over his own feet at the sudden onslaught. Astrid turned back to the others and their guide, waiting some ways off with her own dragon. "That makes all of us," she said.

Freyja nodded, and with a curious glance at the latest addition to the party, turned to mount her dragon. The others followed suit, the twins still bickering, and Gobber offering vocal lamentations about Grump's eagerness â€“ "Oho, I promise you won't look near so happy when we get there, yeh glorified set o' bellows. And stop yer droolin'!" At the far end of the group, Astrid caught a wordless exchange between the Haddocks as Stoick mounted Skullcrusher. There was tension there, and an old dwelling sadness in moss-green eyes that were so similar to Hiccup's she had a hard time drawing her eyes away, though it was an obviously private moment. She caught a small hand lingering against a fur-wrapped forearm, and a whiskered smile that didn't seem quite as confident as it should.

And she wondered, suddenly, if Valka was saying goodbye_._

Her heart hurt in her chest â€“ Hiccup had been gone less than half a day, and was most likely still alive. She couldn't even imagine the possibility that he wouldn't be coming back, let alone the actual reality of it â€“ that they'd reach JÃ¶rnheimr to find it was too late. It seemed absurd, somehow, that someone like him could perish like that â€“ alive one second and gone the next.

But Astrid had vivid memories of loosening a burning arrow into the cold winter mist, her fingers numb against the softly yielding wood of a bow crafted for that very purpose. It wasn't absurd; it was everything but, and the knowledge sat like tension in Valka's rigid

shoulders, Astrid could see that even at a distance. And if Stoick didn't make it back this time, for whatever reason...

The thought made her feel sick, and she drew her gaze away as Valka lifted herself atop her own dragon. And with a last precautionary tug at the buckles, Astrid jumped into Toothless' saddle. It was always a little different than riding Stormfly, but she'd taken him for rides enough times in the past month to be more than a little familiar, and it didn't take her long to find her feet snug in the stirrups, and for her body to know exactly how much weight it took to adjust the tail-prosthetic just so.

The Night Fury was restless beneath her, but waited until he was sure she was comfortable in the saddle before he took off, and she drew her hood over her head to guard against the biting wind. She could spot Freyja's dragon up ahead, like a small sun in the far distance. "Okay, bud. Let's go find our lost chief, hmm?"

Stormfly pulled up to her side, and Eret shouted up at her, "Astrid, blast it, what in Hel's name are you doing?"

She glanced down to where he clung to Stormfly's saddle, having managed to extract himself from her claws to climb his way up her side. "We're going on a trip!" she announced cheerily, though she was feeling nothing like it. But it made her feel a little better, and the pressure in her chest lessened some.

"I didn't say I wanted to come along!"

"Too bad, you're coming anyway!" She glanced down again. "Stormfly, good girl take good care of him, now. It's about to get a little dangerous."

Eret balked. "Danger now wait just a minute!"

Snotlout flexed his muscles as Hookfang drew close. "Taking on the realm of giants, man. That's some pretty big shit. Y'know, because they're giants."

Eret looked, uncomprehending, at Snotlout. "Realm of what?"

"Ugh. Bless your gorgeous, empty head," Ruffnut sighed from the saddle on the other side. Tuff rolled his eyes.

"I vote we use him as bait if we need to make a quick escape."

"No one is using anyone as bait," Astrid called over her shoulder. "We're going back with one more, and no less!" Her hands clenched against the saddle's pommel, to keep them from shaking. She didn't risk a glance towards the former chief. No less than everyone.

"You think he's alright?" Ruffnut asked seriously, having drawn her approving eyes away from Eret as the two-headed dragon flew up close to Toothless and Stormfly.

Astrid expelled the breath she'd kept in her breast, heavy like a stone. "He needs to be," she said simply, keeping her eyes on the horizon in the distance. Toothless was looking straight ahead, but

his ears were pressed flat against his skull. She spotted Cloudjumper at her far right, and Skullcrusher on her opposite side; neither of Hiccup's parents spoke, and even Gobber seemed to keep his thoughts to himself now.

She ran her hand along the side of Toothless' neck, just below the chin. The dragon glanced up at her, and she pressed her mouth to a determined line. "We need him to be alright."

* * *

><p>"Well this takes the prize for worst day
ever."

Muttering under his breath, Hiccup slunk low along the ridge of a small outcropping of rocks, trying to remain hidden from whatever lurked in the trees ahead. He hadn't the faintest idea where he was, but he didn't have to be a genius to figure there was something dangerous lying in wait between the jutting rocks and the eerily silent greenery. The cold sun had sunk low, but he hadn't spotted a single animal — not even the twitch of a mouse or the cry of a bird. And he'd scouted for wild dragons long enough to know a bad sign when he saw one.

Not to mention, Loki wouldn't have gone through the effort of taking him halfway across the world just to dump him somewhere perfectly safe.

He thought back to his parting words—

"You can't just drop me here and leave!"

The god glanced down from the dragon's back, thin smile stretched wide across his face. "It's nothing personal."

Hiccup balked. "It's feeling pretty personal to me!"

Loki shrugged. "Have fun! I might be rooting for you, I might not." He patted Halfwyrm's neck. "Let's see how it goes first, shall we?"

"Loki! Hey, get back here!" But his call was promptly ignored, and without further delay both dragon and god wrapped themselves in shadows and were gone. —

Hiccup ran a hand through his hair. "Why me?"

There was a rustle in the bushes behind him, and he whirled, hands grabbing for a sword he couldn't find, and there was a curse at the tip of his tongue as his fingers moved to grapple along the ground for — anything, really. A rock to throw, or a stick. Not going to do much against anything bigger than a rabbit. —

Another rustle — a branch this time, and he felt his hopes plummet as his fingers closed over a small stone the size of a plum. He felt the sudden, inexplicable urge to laugh. Oh, man. Please just let that be an **enormous** rabbit. A big, soft, fluffy —

But the shape that came hurtling out of the bushes wasn't a rabbit at all, but a person — a woman, he realized on closer inspection as

she drew to a sudden stop in front of him. Sturdy of build and clad in modest armour, she rose a full head taller than him; she wore a plain helmet over her head, and her hair was wound in a tight braid, a golden tail whipping against her back.

Hiccup gaped, hand still raised to attack with his rock. "Uh."

She reached up to remove her helmet, revealing plump cheeks flushed from her run, and the golden strands of her forelock curling with moisture. She had a strong nose, and sharp-but-kind features, brows arching high and elegant above eyes dark as the soil underfoot. In a way, she brought him in mind of his own lady, though she wasn't nearly so young. Or was she?

And he knew her then for what she was, by his inability to determine her age. He held back a groan. Why. Me. —

She glanced around. "If you're trying to hide, you're not doing a very good job," she pointed out, almost cheerily, as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Nice to meet you, too," he deadpanned, but breathed a little easier now that the immediate danger had been averted. He took in her garb — not a warrior's dress, though she wore a small shield strapped to her back and a short sword at her hip. But like her elegant brows so at odds with her strong facial features, there were tiny blue flowers stitched into the leather of her jerkin, and she carried her shield with a woven cord of wheat nearly as thick as her braid.

"So, which one are you?" he asked, as he searched his mind for names long since heard and forgotten. "Did Loki send you to help 'liven things up'?"

At the mention of the name, her smiling features hardened, her lovely brows drawing together like the clash of swords, and she was a storm brewing, thunder in her veins and in her earth-dark eyes. "Do not mistake me for a friend of that fiend," she snapped, and he was momentarily taken aback by her sudden anger.

"Okay," he said, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace as he took a tentative step back. "No friend, then." He looked her over. "He didn't dump you here, too, did he?"

She snorted at that, but her anger seemed to lessen a fraction. "I'd like to see him try," she retorted. "No, I came here of my own volition. I am Sif," she said, with a bow of her head. "I'm here to aid in your escape."

"Sif?" He searched his mind. He'd heard the name before, but in passing. Or so he thought. He could be mistaken.

"Harvest daughter," she continued, a little wryly, seeing his obvious struggle. "Wife of Thor?"

"Oh." Hiccup tried a sheepish smile — the one that always got him out of trouble with the women in his life. "Yeah, okay." Wife of **Thor**? "Uh, I don't mean to be rude" I mean, I appreciate your...help, but...why?"

A clever smile lingered at the corner of her mouth. "I'm no friend of

Loki Laufeyson, but your patron lady I hold in high regard," she explained, as though that actually explained anything at all. "And I've a bone to pick with the Trickster, for a cruel trick gone long unpaid."

"Loki tricked you?" He tried to remember the stories he'd heard of the trickster god and the trouble he'd caused, but drew a blank. There was something about thievery — the mothers of Berk would always invoke the name when their children were caught pilfering loaves of fresh bread from kitchen windows and grog from their parents' table. He also wanted to ask what she meant by 'patron lady'. Loki had mentioned something of the like, before he'd had Hiccup shipped gods only knew where on a dragon who defied common sense. He'd never travelled this far out on any of his trips with Toothless.

Sif smiled. "I would not expect you to know the tale," she said. "But—"

She wasn't given the chance to finish, cut off by a sudden rumble that had the ground heaving beneath their feet. "Whoa!" He wavered, but managed a perilous balance. When he looked back up Sif had her eyes on something behind him, brows pulled together in wary vigilance. Then another rumble followed at the heels of the first, along with a rustling in the thick copse of trees some ways off. Hiccup blanched. That is definitely ~~not~~ a rabbit.

"That would be our cue to leave!" he heard her announce, but before he could gather his wits, she'd driven her shoulder into his midsection, knocking the air clean from his lungs as she hoisted him up, before she took off running back the way she'd come.

"Hey! What—"

"You've one good leg at your disposal," she shouted up at him. "This is quicker. And trust me when I say we need a good head start!"

He didn't get another chance to protest, for not a moment after the words had left her lips, an enormous shape towering tall as a pine and wide as a small mountain came barrelling out of the treeline, and Hiccup had to keep from calling out in alarm.

"What is that?"

"That would be a giant," she explained, almost jovially, and he nearly choked on his tongue.

"Giant? Wait a minute — there are giants?"

She laughed, a breathless sound nearly lost on the wind. "This is Jötunheimr, little viking — it's all there is!"

"Jötun?" are you kidding me? That's where he left me?!"

He got no reply, but was further occupied by keeping himself in place as she made a sharp turn, before dashing off into a sprint that would have given him a run for his money five years ago when he'd had two good legs at his disposal and been one of the fastest in Berk. Of the giant he caught only brief glimpses over her shoulder, though keeping his eyes open was making him nauseated and so he pressed them shut.

He doubted she'd appreciate him emptying his breakfast down her back.

He lost track of how far and how long they ran, but the rumblings became distant, until he couldn't make them out at all, and at last she drew to a stop, halting below the shade of a large rock jutting out of a hill. With the trees growing around it, it provided better cover than he'd found for himself earlier, but she prowled around it, restlessness lingering in her every move.

"So," Hiccup wheezed, as she finally came to a stop. His vision spun, and he felt an odd surge in his stomach. Not even barrel rolls with Toothless left him this queasy. He managed a slightly hysterical laugh. "What was the trick? The one he pulled on you?" It had to be pretty big, to have her come all the way to Jötunheimr to help a human, and risk her life carrying him around like a sack of grain.

She looked up to where he dangled over her shoulders, sweat clinging to her brow like pearls, though she was no shorter of breath than if she'd have made the run without his added weight. "He cut off my hair, once," she said breezily. "As a jest."

"Your hair?" he choked, disbelieving. "You doing this because he cut off your hair?" He shook his head. "Should I even be surprised at this point?"

Sif offered him a bemused smile, as though she couldn't find a simpler issue than the one at their feet. Then she shrugged, and the action drove her shoulder into his stomach, and consequently the air from his lungs. "Gods get bored," she said with a laugh, and Hiccup had to hold on for dear life as she took off again into the underbush. "Come on, we've got miles to go yet before we reach the river, and it's not safe out in the open once night falls."

Hiccup didn't offer a worded reply, only a drawn-out groan as the world jumped and tilted around him, and the jarring motion of her movements beckoned invitingly at the contents of his stomach.

He'd never once missed flying quite so much.

* * *

><p>AN: Sif is described as being fair and lovely, but I've always imagined her as a bit stouter than some illustrations make her out as. She's the wife of Thor, and I like to picture her as not just the lady of the house, but as a woman who can pack a punch. In a way, a little bit like Astrid.</p>

Freyja's dragon: Sálscale is named such for her scales, which make her glow like a small sun. In Norse mythology, Sál (or Sunna in some sources), is the sun personified.

Sif: Goddess of the harvest and the earth and wife of Thor.

Æfingr: the river that separates Jötunheimr and Asgard.

End
file.